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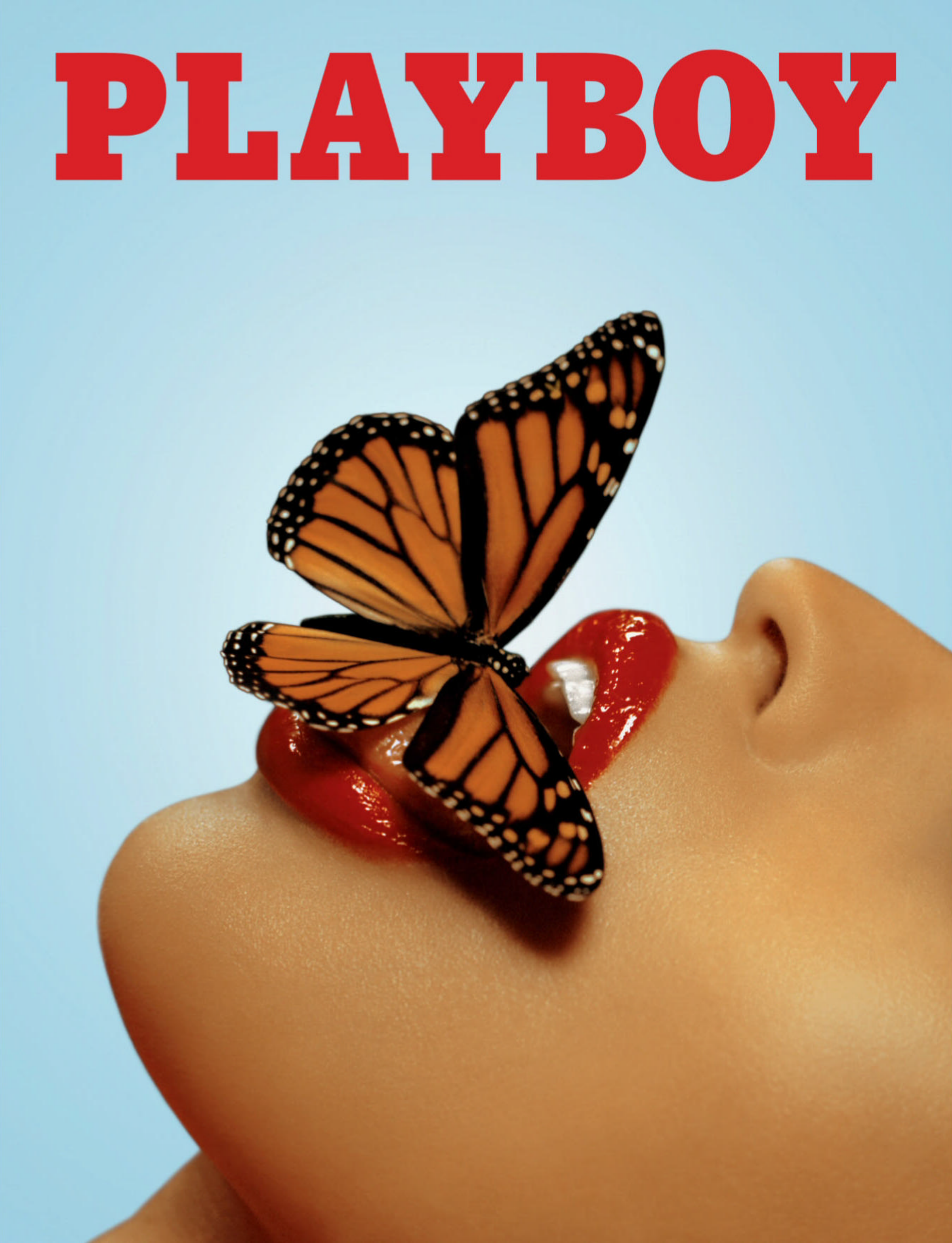

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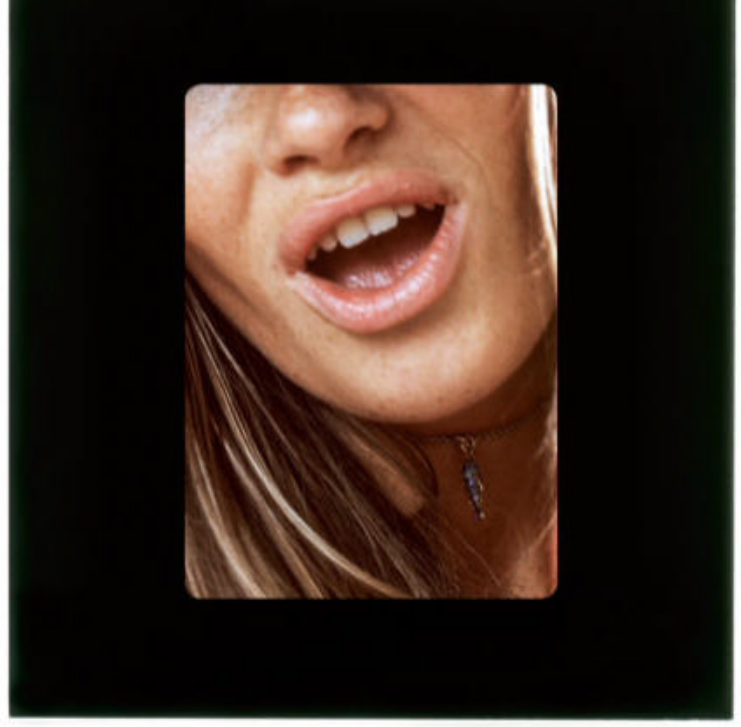

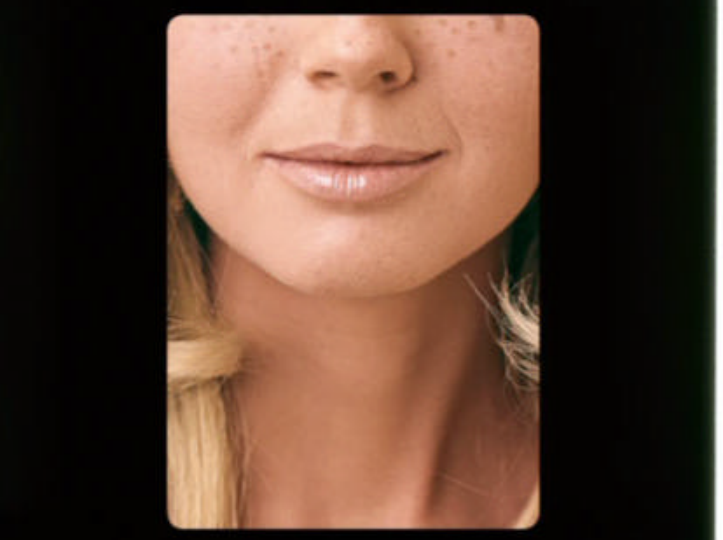

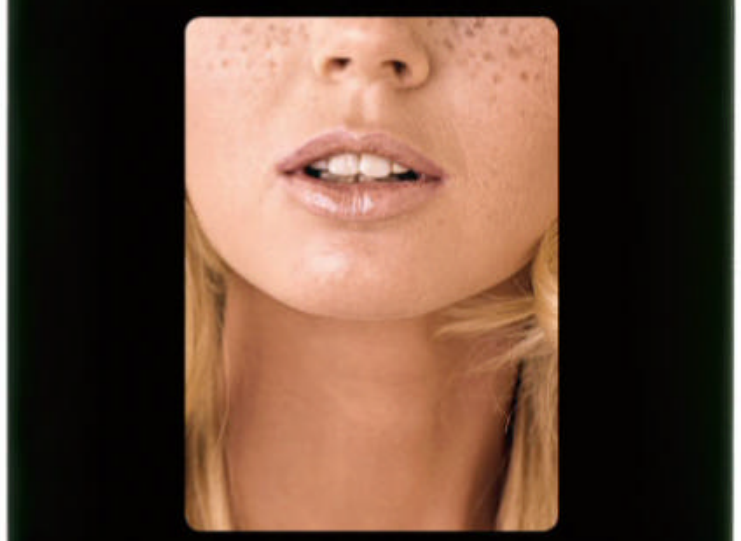

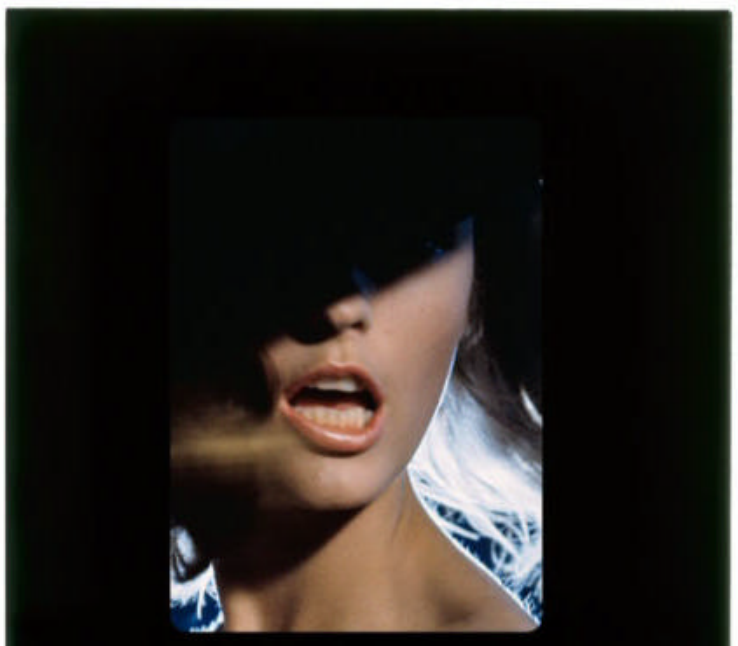
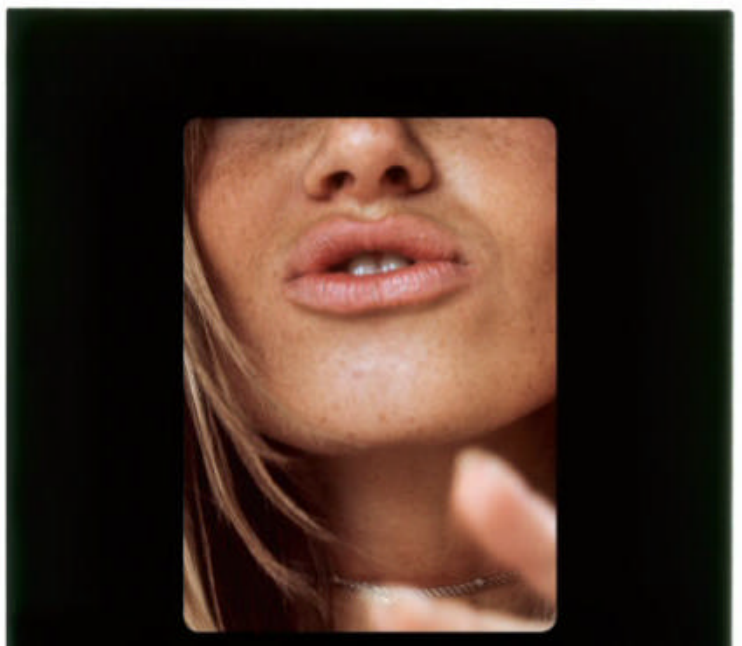
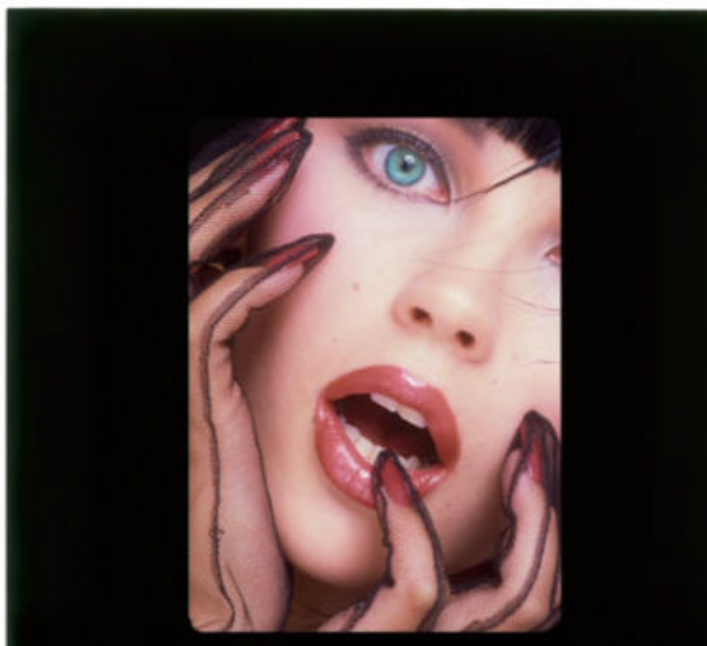
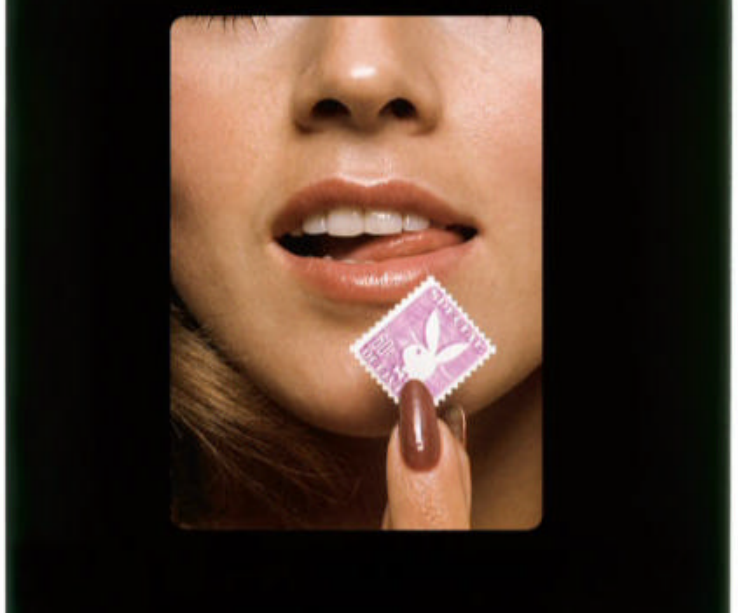

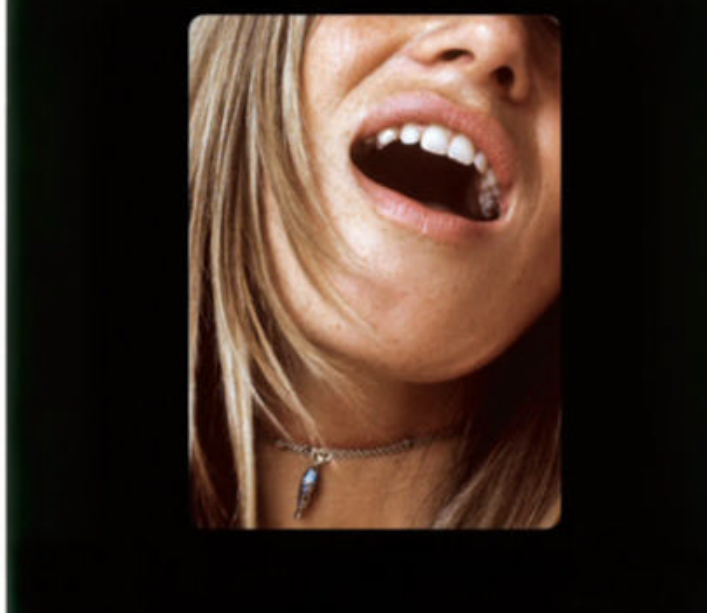

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ADRIENNE RAQUEL

i: @adrienneraquel

"My work is all about female empowerment," says Raquel, who blessed this issue with a double dose of her dreamy aesthetic. She shot *Lizzo the Incomparable*—"Lizzo is an entire *vibe*," says the photographer. "She's gorgeous, confident and funny, and she isn't afraid to speak her mind. Capturing her was effortless"—and 2019 Playmate of the Year Jordan Emanuel's 1980s art deco–inspired pictorial. "It oozed glamour," she says of the latter.

JOHN WATERS

"Get your lazy overeducated asses out in the streets where you belong," Waters demands. It's hard to imagine a more fitting contributor to this issue than the indie pioneer and creator of such campy classics as *Pink Flamingos* and *Hairspray*. The Baltimorean button-pusher, whose Playboy stints include interviewing Little Richard and hosting a Playboy TV series, trains his off-color lens on activism in *Act Bad!*, our exclusive excerpt from *Mr. Know-It-All,* out in May from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

DAVID GILBERT

t: @davegilbs

"What happens when a narcissist awakens to find herself invisible?" That's just one of the questions Gilbert explores in *We Are Not Here,* a short story that delves into the psyche of a fading starlet who must confront a specter from her past. Gilbert, whose writing has appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper's* and *GQ,* is the author of three books, the most recent being *& Sons*. He is currently working on a new novel for Random House.

MARIA DEL RUSSO

i: @mariadelrusso

In an era of ascendant sexual fluidity, gender-swapping the voice behind our signature and historically male-penned Advisor franchise was an organic decision. "It was definitely daunting, but I've always strived to discuss sex in a frank and positive way for everyone, regardless of gender expression," says Del Russo of taking on the role. In addition to PLAYBOY, Del Russo has written about sex and relationships for *The Cut*, *Men's Health* and *The Washington Post*.

EVAN PRICCO

i: @epricco

As custodian of one of America's most impactful arts publications, Pricco was uniquely positioned to curate the art-as-activism edition of *Playboy Symposium*. With the introduction of a rising crop of artists who are both "participating in and sabotaging the gears of our contemporary art machine," the *Juxtapoz* editor in chief makes the case that art remains one of the most potent vehicles for free expression in a culture saturated with memes and emojis.

CIARA O'ROURKE

t: @ciaraorourke

For *The Green Scare,* O'Rourke, an Austin, Texas–based journalist and contributing writer for *PolitiFact,* examines the Trump administration's quiet suppression of climate science. What scares her most about state-imposed censorship? "How pernicious it can be." The 2015–16 Ted Scripps Fellow in Environmental Journalism adds that "sources discussed self-policing to the point where some scientists were avoiding using the words *climate change* without an order to do so."

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VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

t: @page88

Who better to further dialogue on the country's hottest-button issues than a pair of not-always-aligned cultural critics? In this installment of the *Playboy Interview,* Heffernan—a *Wired* contributing editor, *Los Angeles Times* columnist and co-host of Slate's *Trumpcast*—dives deep with *Proof of Collusion* author Seth Abramson into bipartisan politics, literary tweeting and, of course, Kremlin collusion.

LYNSEY ADDARIO

i: @lynseyaddario

"In many countries where stereotypes about women in Islam are perpetuated, free speech is silenced or nonexistent," says Addario, the Pulitzer Prize–winning photojournalist who has covered international conflict and humanitarian crises for almost two decades. Of fellow photographer Yumna Al-Arashi, the subject of *Yumna in Focus,* she says, "Through her nudes and self-portraits, and her ability to document her body freely, Al-Arashi is creating a new narrative of Muslim women."

GIL MACIAS

i: @gilmacias78

We sent PLAYBOY's own managing editor to dine with Frank Grillo for this issue's style feature. Despite his familiarity with Grillo's career, Macias, a longtime entertainment writer who specializes in pop culture, superheroes, cosplay and "all things geeky," was struck by the action star's depth. "I expected to discuss fight culture but was blown away by how wise and layered he is," says the 13-year PLAYBOY veteran. "It was cool to witness those layers peel back."

APARNA NANCHERLA

t: @aparnapkin

Nancherla has made a name for herself by actually *being* herself, neuroses and all, so she was a shoo-in for the humor section of our free-speech issue. In *Hot Take It or Leave It,* the *Corporate* and *BoJack Horseman* star weighs the power and pitfalls of forgoing reflection in an age of instant gratification.

ROB STITES

i: @rob.stites

What do you get when you cross an illustrator with a bibliophile? The witty, whimsical visual that introduces James R. Petersen's *Defying the Anti-Porn Police,* and some incisive commentary on the evolution of "sexual McCarthyism": "The strategies used to advance political agendas have evolved but are ultimately far easier to identify," says Stites. The Seattle-born Brooklynite's PLAYBOY debut also includes the etymologically gifted hound on page 125.

MARCUS REEVES

i: @mreeves2020

Two weeks before hitting the Super Bowl halftime stage with Big Boi, Travis Scott joined a different hip-hop legend—the one and only Nas. Reeves, a reporter on music and youth culture for 20-plus years, moderated the PLAYBOY conversation. "A main talking point was no matter how different this era of hip-hop is from those prior, the music's message is still the same," says Reeves. "It's about representing unheard voices of American youth."

John Waters, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, May 21, 2019, copyright © 2019 John Waters, all rights reserved; pp. 106, 232 illustrations by Neryl Walker; p. 209 "LGLZ DRGS" cartoon by Shel Silverstein, © Evil Eye, LLC, used by permission. Pp. 14–16 styling by India Madonna, hair and makeup by Bree Stanchfield; pp. 50–57 model Jordan Emanuel, styling by Ryan Young, hair by Patrick Shannon, makeup by Andre Love, prop styling by Alex Silva; pp. 58–65 styling by Kelley Ash, Dominique Bisson, April Roomet, grooming by Marcus Hatch, makeup by Jennifer Hanching, prop styling by Justin Fry; pp. 72–83, 87 model Fo Porter, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Casey Gore, prop styling by Nico Maccioca, produced by Nicole Prokes; pp. 94–99 styling by Andrew Gelwicks, grooming by Jillian Halouska; pp. 104–105 styling by Jenny Haapala, hair by Corey Tuttle, grooming by Melissa Dezarate, makeup by Aidan Keogh; pp. 108–113 styling by Jason Rembert, hair by Shelby Swain, makeup by Ernesto Casillas; pp. 120–124 styling by Stephanie Tricola, hair by Wesley O'Meara, makeup by Michelle Kearns; pp. 126–137, 141 model Abigail O'Neill, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Bree Stanchfield, prop styling by Justin Fry; pp. 150–157 styling by Annie & Hannah, grooming and makeup by Kat Bardot, prop styling by Justin Fry; pp. 158–163 (and cover) models Jesi Le Rae and Frances Florence Tomei, styling by Chloe and Chenelle Delgadillo, hair by Preston Wada, makeup by Sara Tagaloa, prop styling by Casey Hinders, manicure by Michelle Saunders, tooth gems by Michelle Neubieser at Sugar Tooth Jewels; pp. 172–183, 187 model Yoli Lara, styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Daniel De La Torre.

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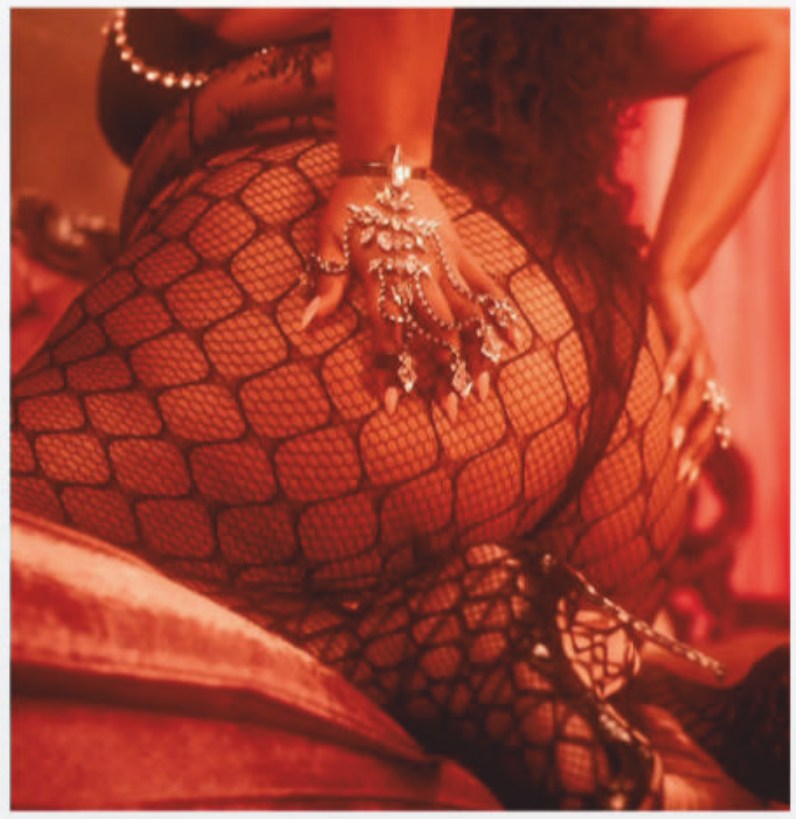

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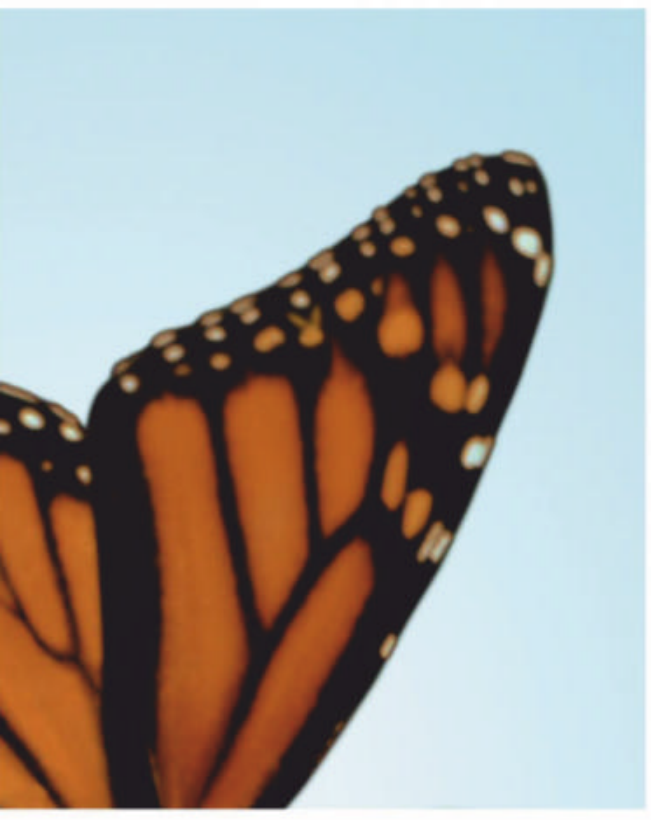
When it comes to standing up for free speech, our Rabbit firmly believes you should never just wing it; always be ready to mouth off.



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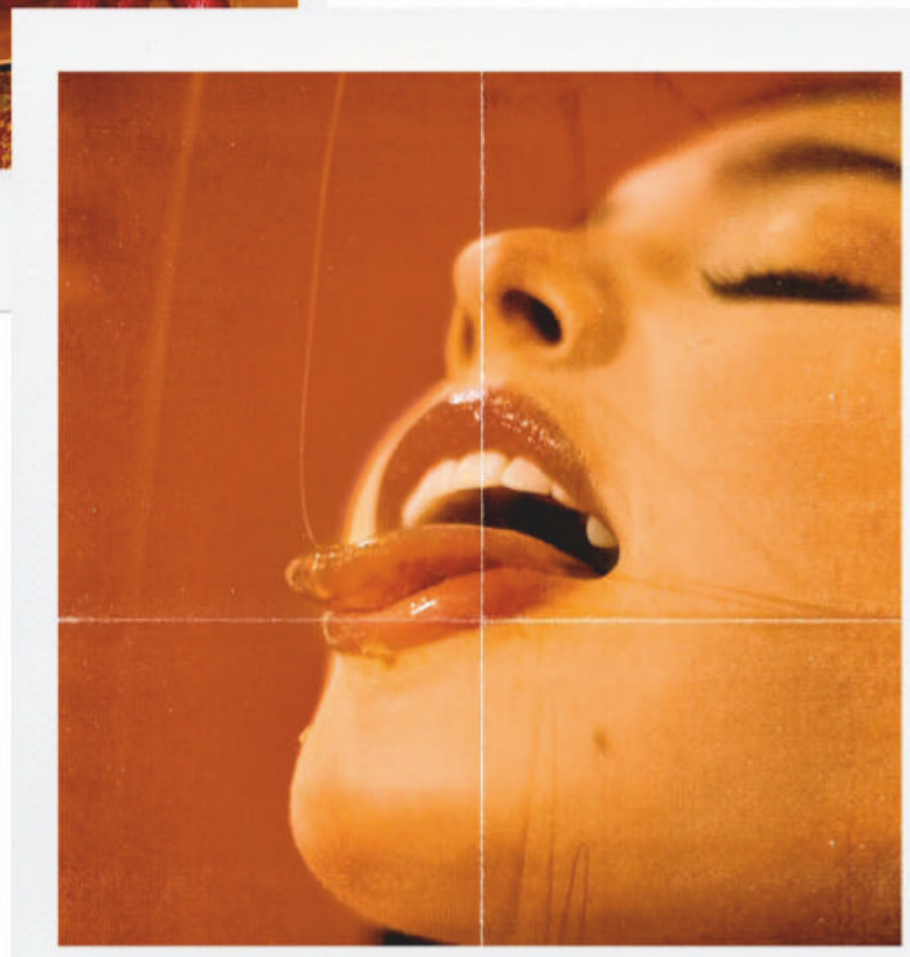

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

To our readers:

In this second issue of our 65th anniversary year, we focus on a topic that is just as relevant today as it was in 1953: freedom of speech. As our team set out to plan this issue, we agreed that the most radical, provocative and productive contribution we could make to the conversation is not to speak louder, but to listen better. In these 234 pages, we are lending our platform to voices that have been disparaged, marginalized or missed—voices that some may even consider dangerous because they might just change your mind.

Which brings us to the monarch butterfly on our cover. Its scientific name means "sleepy transformation," suggesting a change that could catch you off guard if you aren't paying attention. This issue is a showcase for individuals with such transformative potential. You probably haven't heard of all of them yet, but we believe they'll become critical mainstream voices very soon.

This is the butterfly effect. Small events, like the beating of a monarch's wings, can cause enormous and unpredictable effects. With this idea in mind, it's worth noting that Kelia Anne, who shot our cover, is just 25 years old. Like many young people today, Kelia innately understands that while we consider freedom of speech a fundamental right, it's also something delicate, potentially even endangered, that must be continually fought for and protected. We're proud to showcase Kelia's distinct point of view and look forward to seeing her make waves for years to come.

The people you'll meet in this issue fall into the same category. First up, Seth Abramson has re-created the Twitter thread as a tool to provide one of the most rigorous and eye-opening dissections of President Donald Trump's relationship with Russia and other foreign powers. In a wide-ranging *Playboy Interview,* Abramson walks us through "proof of collusion" and explains why his "curatorial journalism" is as important to today's democracy as the mainstream press.

In *Rapper's Delight,* hip-hop megastars Nas and Travis Scott make a joint promise to their fans that they'll continue to tell their truths via music's most powerful genre, without censoring themselves for commercial or political expediency. Environmental journalist Ciara O'Rourke reports on the courage and steadfastness of government climate scientists risking their careers to save our planet. And in *Man in His Domain,* the Reverend William J. Barber II, a celebrated orator who has been compared to Martin Luther King Jr., argues why hope must be immutable for all Americans.

We dedicate our artist feature to one of our favorite photographers, Yumna Al-Arashi, who interprets free speech through arresting nude self-portraiture. Al-Arashi's work is "evocative, sensual, playful and a bit withholding," writes Pulitzer Prize–winning photojournalist Lynsey Addario in her introduction to the Yemeni American artist. And in our music feature, we present the formidable and undeniable Lizzo, who speaks inspiringly on creating a culture of body positivity.

In our first-ever *Symposium* collaboration, we partnered with *Juxtapoz,* one of the country's preeminent contemporary arts magazines, to spotlight six rising artists whose in-your-face, genre-expanding works defy convention and censorship.

In *20Q,* Hollywood hell-raiser David Harbour preaches the importance of actors using their celebrity to promote awareness of social issues, and Michelle Wolf (in *Chasing the Last Laugh*) offers a lesson in staying true to oneself in today's dizzying climate. Finally, we offer the perspectives of three remarkable and eye-catching Playmates—Fo Porter, Abigail O'Neill and Yoli Lara—and the three brilliant photographers who shot them: Ali Mitton, Kayla Varley and Ana Dias, respectively.

Every one of our contributors feels not just empowered by today's climate but responsible for a better tomorrow. As do we. Instead of being disheartened by disunity and discord, we are energized by them.

And so we leave you with one last provocation: As we welcome in challenging ideas, we want to hear from you. Tell us what you think. We're listening.

PLAYBOY

BY

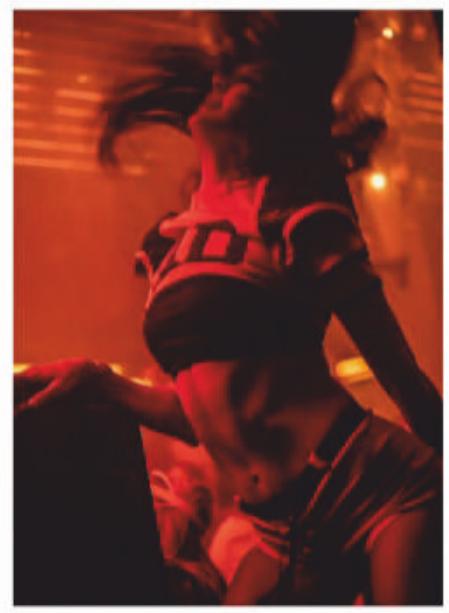
PACSUN

BUTTERFLY KISSES

With America furiously debating the parameters of free speech, we wanted this issue, including the visuals that introduce it, to reflect expression without limitation. To bring that concept to life, we tapped 25-year-old photographer Kelia Anne, among PLAYBOY's youngest cover artists to date. Kelia Anne's surreal, colorful world, starring a preserved butterfly perched on the tip of model Jesi Le Rae's tongue, is at once inviting and startling, nostalgic and fresh. These tensions make for an arresting image while capturing the complexities of silence and speech. "I envisioned a scenario in which voices are expressed visually, as sweet and fragile, and silence is on the cusp of being broken," says Kelia Anne. "I also considered the false negative implications associated with breaking it." The intimate shoot was rife with special moments: "At one point, Jesi was balancing the butterfly on her mouth, and her breathing was moving the wings. Everyone on set was in awe. Balancing a butterfly on your tongue is no easy feat."

FINE LINES

Myriad artists have reimagined Vampirella since Trina Robbins, using Playboy model and longtime employee Barbara Leigh as her muse, drew the now-iconic heroine into the comicsphere in 1969. Award-winning illustrator Joyce Chin conjures the latest Vampi for *Make Up to Break Up,* an exclusive installment penned by Gail Simone. "I love her fearlessness," says Chin of the character. "She has always been unapologetic about her physicality, her sexuality and how she moves through the world."

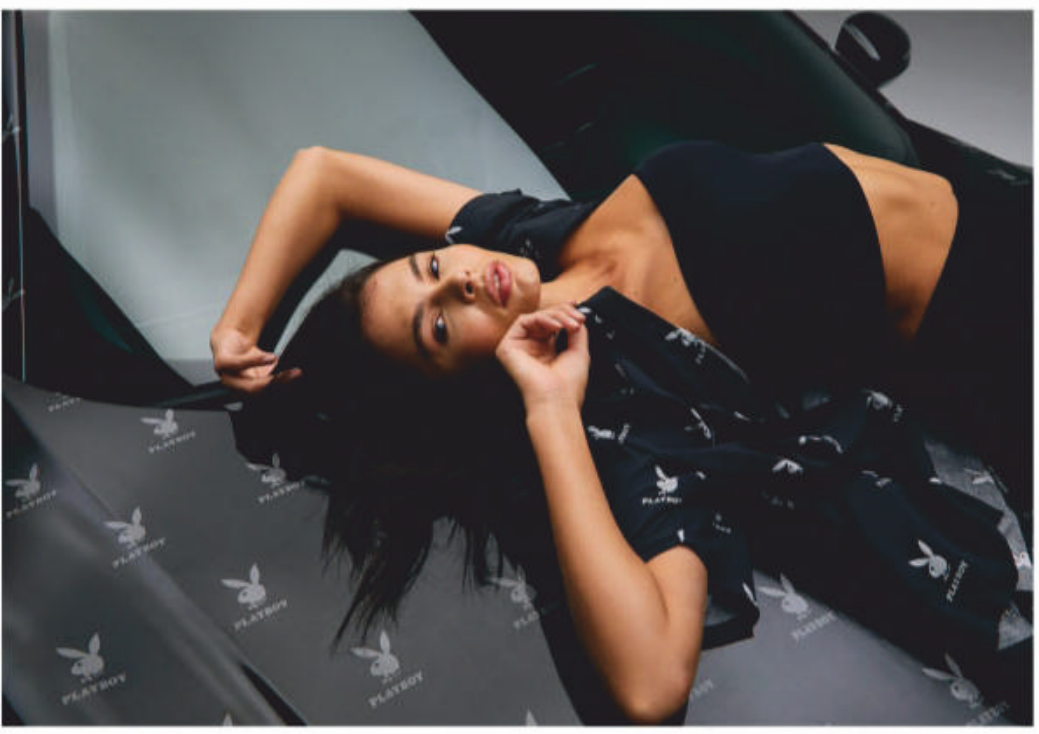


2019 BUNNY BOWL

Day drinking, anyone? Our Rabbit celebrated Super Bowl LIII with the Bunny Bowl, a special edition of LAVO Party Brunch in Las Vegas, where football fans joined Playmates Gia Marie, Stephanie Branton, Ashley Doris and Carly Lauren for drinks, eats and touchdown-worthy tunes by DJ Lema.

THAT'S A RAP

You'd expect setting up a tête-à-tête between two of the world's most famous rappers to be complicated, but getting Travis Scott and Nas in the same room was surprisingly easy. In fact, the biggest challenge was getting them to stop: The two were going so deep during the Q&A for *Rapper's Delight,* they had to be interrupted so we could begin Scott's photo shoot. Above, a candid snap from that afternoon.



FUN IN THE PACSUN

As September 2012 Playmate Alana Campos makes clear, Playboy's spring/summer 2019 collaboration with PacSun takes athleisure to new levels of luxury. The collection features classic silhouettes, gold metallic details and plenty of pointy-eared cameos. *pacsun.com/pacsun-collections/*

2019 PLAYBOY JAZZ FESTIVAL PREVIEW

ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO Since performing at 2013's Jazz Fest, the Benin-born artist has picked up two Grammys, accepted Amnesty International's 2016 Ambassador of Conscience Award and released a front-to-back reinterpretation of the Talking Heads' *Remain in Light*. It's hard to overstate her importance in world music and harder still to render in words the life-affirming experience of seeing her live.

MACEO PARKER BIG BAND An indispensable part of James Brown's best years who has also played with the likes of Parliament-Funkadelic and Prince, Parker is an artist whose saxophone work resides deep in our collective consciousness. He brings to Jazz Fest his Big Band, which backed him on last year's ebullient long-player *It's All About Love*.

DONNY MCCASLIN *Blackstar,* the album David Bowie released just days before his death, features the haunting tracery of this Santa Cruz–bred saxophonist. For McCaslin's 2018 album *Blow.,* he kept alive the Starman's instinctual approach; the result is wild and restrained and much in between, but pulsingly alive throughout.

SONA JOBARTEH The *kora,* a 21-string instrument developed among a handful of West African griot families, remains underappreciated in the U.S., despite cameos in the works of Taj Mahal, Herbie Hancock, Björk and others. Jobarteh brings a special intensity to her performances, in part because she's the first major female *kora* artist, but the diamond precision of her technique and voice is the main attraction.

MICHAEL MAYO This Los Angeles native, still in his mid-20s, needs nothing more than his voice to stop you dead in your tracks—not just because his sorcerer-like facility with a loop pedal evokes hypnotic works such as Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" and Imogen Heap's "Hide and Seek," but because he possesses a vocal purity that comes along only a few times per generation.

The 41st Annual Playboy Jazz Festival returns to the Hollywood Bowl June 8 and 9. Tickets: hollywoodbowl.com/playboyjazz/

EILEEN *Kelly*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DANA TRIPPE**

CENSORSHIP. SPECTRUMS. CONSENT. THE NEXT SEXUAL REVOLUTION IS UPON US, AND "THE TALK" NEEDS TO BE REVISITED. WHO CAN WE TRUST TO LEAD THE CONVERSATION? MEET AMERICA'S NEXT SEX (ED) SYMBOL

BY
ANITA LITTLE

It began with a kiss, as so many sexual awakenings do. Eileen Kelly, who attended Catholic schools in Seattle and comes from a devoutly religious family, still remembers how she felt when a teacher humiliated her for kissing a boy. "I was in third grade, I think, and it was just a peck on the cheek, but it had a lasting effect," she says. "Shame was just so deeply rooted in how I grew up."

Now 23, Kelly straddles the millennial generation and the coming-of-age Generation Z, a position that makes her one of the freshest faces in the movement to guarantee every person in this country access to a sex education that's inclusive, gratifying and medically accurate. She wants her generation to participate in more honest conversations about sexuality, enter relationships with more realistic expectations and help demystify the stigmas that burden so many sexual curiosities and subcultures.

"The sex ed we wish we had" is the simple but purposeful mantra of Kelly's brand, Killer and a Sweet Thang, which has exploded on Instagram and, since 2016, as a lifestyle website that publishes such pieces as "What Does Consent Look Like?" "Intro to BDSM Toys," "PrEP 101" and "How Porn Has Affected Millennial Sex Lives." Killer and a Sweet Thang launched as a Tumblr blog focusing on Kelly's own sexual misadventures, but she soon realized first-person sexcapades weren't enough.

"The defining moment," she says, "was when I realized I was sharing only one perspective, which was a narrow one—that of a white woman who lives in a big, liberal city. I've always had access to health care, for example. If I wanted people to come to my website and be able to learn and connect, it needed to be intersectional. I needed stories across the board."

Today, more than 100 people contribute stories to Killer and a Sweet Thang, which has spun off into another, more editorial-focused Instagram account, @birds.bees—the inspiration for Kelly's PLAYBOY shoot. Accompanied by GIFs, erotic photography and an unrelenting directness, Killer and a Sweet Thang's articles, columns and social posts target young people who may find technical writing or government-provided information about sex too polarizing, out of touch or impersonal.

Killer and a Sweet Thang's popularity couldn't be rising at a better time. "Sexual expression feels under fire," attests Kelly, who currently lives in New York. In December, Tumblr initiated a ban on all adult content in response to allegations that the platform had unwittingly hosted child pornography. Two months prior, sex-ed site o.School published an open letter calling out Apple's new iPhone iOS 12, alleging the software's parental controls blocked searches related to sex education, safe sex and masturbation. YouTube has similarly

been accused of blocking LGBTQ content. With no consensus among tech companies and social media platforms over how to host educational portrayals of and discussions about sex, openness around the topic is becoming harder to accomplish even as the world becomes more connected.

Not that learning about sex in America has ever been easy. When most Americans think of sex education, they often picture a gym teacher listlessly pointing to parts of the reproductive system on a whiteboard. (*Mean Girls*'s oft-quoted "Don't have sex, 'cause you will get pregnant and die!" scene comes to mind.) And with sex education not required in 26 states, many people recall nothing at all.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, 27 states and the District of Columbia mandate that public school sex-ed programs, when provided, fulfill "certain general requirements"; of these states, only 13 require that the content be medically accurate. Overall, only nine require that discussions of sexual orientation be inclusive. Since sex education falls under states' rights, policies vary widely. While California mandates that syllabi cover contraception, Texas stresses abstinence, despite research that proves abstinence-only teachings are ineffective.

Kelly, who remembers first learning about STIs from an uncertified health teacher, says she has been fighting to reverse this culture her whole life. "It wasn't even the lack of education for me," she says. "It was the lack of conversation happening in family units, in the community, amongst peers. It was a very hush-hush bubble I grew up in."

Kelly lost her mother before reaching her teens. Lacking the person most young girls turn to with questions ranging from how to use a tampon to how to tell if you're in love, she was raised by a single father in a household of boys. Having to navigate the rough waters of puberty without a maternal figure sparked Kelly's precocious curiosity about sexuality and her resolve to embrace the awkward questions whispered at sleepovers and in locker rooms.

"Pleasure, safety, consent—these are conversations that should happen really young, way before a sexual-health class," she says. "Even in most comprehensive sex-education courses in the United States, pleasure is left out of the equation."

Combine the dearth of reliable information from schools, the ease of accessing X-rated content online and parents' enduring discomfort with having "the talk," and you're left with a generation learning about sex from peers, porn or pop culture. It shows: Among industrialized nations, the United States has some of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancies. Compared with countries like the Netherlands, where sex education begins as early as kindergarten, America is behind the times. Kelly knows we can do better.

"Your brain is the most powerful sex organ. That's why the internet—this safe, anonymous place where people go to figure out their desires—is such an important part of learning about sex," she says.

That may be why we've also entered the age of the so-called "sexpert," a time when you can barely go online without scrolling past a sex shaman who promises to coach you to a more perfect orgasm. The problem: Many of these "sexperts"—including porn stars, YouTube personalities and podcasters—have no formal backgrounds in sexology. This has caused a schism in the world of sex education, with trained educators voicing skepticism of self-described experts who may be more eager for followers and sponsorships than for bringing the next revolution. Until she recently completed coursework in sex education from the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, Kelly had no sex-ed certification, and she notes it was a point of criticism for her detractors.

"When I was studying and not certified yet, I felt that friction. And that credibility is absolutely needed. You wouldn't take your car to get serviced by someone who wasn't a mechanic," she says.

In person, she appears every bit the embodiment of her online self. With her wide green eyes, cherubic face and soft voice, she may be easy to underestimate. But after a few minutes of talking with her, it becomes clear how she has built a legion of young followers who see her as a reassuring voice amid a confusing, hormone-laden minefield. Indeed, with more than 400,000 followers, Kelly's personal Instagram feed remains the draw, and it would be foolish to ignore its genius. Part sex-ed course, part personal diary, with plenty of pouty, lingerie-clad selfies in between, the @killerandasweetthang account is the visual analogue of the sexually curious and expressive 20-something. Of course, none of it exists without hardship—Kelly has been targeted by trolls and criticized by family members, and when she goes home, "people still don't understand what I do"—but she nevertheless hopes her work can change how all people approach sex.

For now, with the culture wars droning on, there will be no shortage of those who want sex to remain an inscrutable mystery, reminding us of America's puritanical origins. For the rest of us, there's Eileen Kelly, ready to drop some carnal knowledge on anyone willing to learn. ■

STYLING BY KELLEY ASH; OPENING PAGES: PANTIES BY NAKED INTERSECTION, RHINESTONE LEG CHAIN STYLIST'S OWN; THIS PAGE: LINGERIE SET BY LE PETIT TROU

BURN NOTICE

THE ART OF THE CLAPBACK

Protest art has never been so visible or so damn amusing. From wordplay on placards at #Resistance marches to Cardi B blasting Republicans in a freestyle on the recent government shutdown, schooling the ignorant without relying on insults is an art form. (Our president wouldn't know that, of course.) Amid the shouting matches on social media, the clapback has emerged as its own genre of commentary among public figures. Derived from Ja Rule's 2003 song of the same name (meaning to "shoot back"), it has transcended the internet and entered the real world; Nancy Pelosi's gesture toward President Trump at the 2019 State of the Union was viewed as its farcical embodiment. In honor of *Merriam-Webster*'s adding the term to its dictionary this year—definition: "A quick, sharp, and effective response to criticism"—we ranked some of our favorite slights. Enraged by our selections? Clap back at us on Twitter and Instagram: @Playboy.

@KINGJAMES *vs.* @REALDONALDTRUMP

"U bum @StephenCurry30 already said he ain't going! So therefore ain't no invite. Going to White House was a great honor until you showed up!"

LeBron James's sportsmanlike behavior, in defense of fellow NBA champion Curry, whom the president disinvited from the White House, made headlines around the world and became one of the most popular tweets of all time.

@AOC *vs.* AARON SORKIN

"Ever wonder how expression that's feminine, working-class, queer or POC isn't deemed as having 'gravitas,' but talking like an Aaron Sorkin character does? Men have 'gravitas,' women get 'likeable.'"

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: equal-opportunity dragger. In January she joined Human Rights Campaign spokesperson Charlotte Clymer in questioning the liberal screenwriter's call for young Democrats to "grow up."

@IAMHALSEY *vs.* @TIMURMENGLI

"Yeah, it's crazy. I can show my tits in PLAYBOY, perform at the Nobel Peace, speak at the Planned Parenthood gala with Hillary Clinton, shake my ass on 300 stages, give a speech at the United Nations, do 150 shots of tequila, get a #1 album, and march in the streets of DC all in just one year!!!! Newsflash. A woman can be multi-dimensional."

We admit we're biased when it comes to Halsey and her response to a dude who suggested feminists shouldn't be photographed naked. A little louder for those in the back.

@CHRISSYTEIGEN *vs.* @GORGONFREEMAN

"I have a best-selling book, great boobs, a family I love, am literally eating pasta on a lake in Italy and I married rich."

How ruthless is Teigen on Twitter? Ruthless enough to have been blocked by the president. When a user suggested she had peaked, she replied with a reality check.

@MOONPIE *vs.* @SIGURBJORNL

"Buddy it's Saturday night and you're talking to a marshmallow sandwich on the internet."

In 2017, the snack cake hit back at a hater. No joke: Junk food companies that bicker with people on the internet have become hilarious, existential reflections of society.

@JK_ROWLING *vs.* @OMFGNN

"In - Free - Countries - Anyone - Can - Talk - About - Politics. Try sounding out the syllables aloud, or ask a fluent reader to help."

The woman behind the best-selling book series of all time gave a civics lesson to a Muggle who told her to "stay out of politics."

 ILLUSTRATION BY **SARAH MAXWELL**

BY **ERIC SPITZNAGEL**

THE NEW BOOB TUBE

Game of Thrones, which kicks off its final season on HBO this spring, redefined the TV sex scene. Sex and nudity on television aren't going anywhere—but they will need to evolve

When *Game of Thrones* debuts its eighth and final season on April 14, one thing will be glaringly apparent to longtime fans: There aren't nearly as many naked prostitutes in Westeros anymore.

This is particularly disappointing to Samantha Bentley, who has played three different ladies of the night over several seasons of HBO's 47-time Emmy-winning series. "I was hoping maybe they'd have me back one more time before it ends," she says wistfully. "But it doesn't look like that's going to happen. It's a different show now."

By "different," she means, of course, less nude. Exposed flesh on *Game of Thrones* has dropped by a staggering 81.8 percent from season one to season seven. This is a pretty dramatic shift for a show that actor Ian McShane, a onetime guest star, once dismissed as "just tits and dragons."

Game of Thrones isn't a pioneer in gratuitous nudity on mainstream TV. Naked body parts have been slowly but surely sneaking onto American television since Dennis Franz flashed his butt on ABC's *NYPD Blue* in 1994. But it's the first critically acclaimed series to put nudity front and center. The show was once so enthusiastic about rampant nakedness that it inspired new terminology—including *sexposition*, a word coined by TV critic Myles McNutt to explain how *Game of Thrones* uses random unclothed bodies as window dressing for plot exposition.

But the sex seems to have (mostly) disappeared, with no plot-driven explanation. The reason might be that the actors were becoming more resistant. Emilia Clarke, for example, has renegotiated her non-nudity clause with the studio. Or maybe HBO was growing weary of the negative press—one former director claimed he was pressured by producers to do more full-frontal scenes to satisfy the "pervert side of the audience"—and legal battles with sites such as Pornhub, where steamy *Game of Thrones* clips trafficked higher than actual porn.

Whatever the reason, the lack of clothes-less activity in the Seven Kingdoms hasn't slowed the naked renaissance it helped spawn. Indeed, the boob tube has become, quite literally, the boob tube. The number of TV nude scenes featuring women jumped from 497 on 27 different shows in 2008 to 1,370 on 147 shows in 2018, according to Mr. Skin, an online database of nudity in media. Male exposure has seen a similar bump, from 72 scenes across 16 shows in 2008 to 736 scenes on 149 different shows last year.

The explicit carnality on recent shows can make *Game of Thrones* seem downright tame by comparison. All the tropes that first caused Westeros to appear so scandalous—incest, rape, prostitutes, woman-on-woman finger-banging, sex at funerals—have since played out on shows including *Shameless, Harlots, The Deuce, Vida, She's Gotta Have It, Outlander, Altered Carbon* and *Orange Is the New Black*. And they're showing much, much more than anything we witnessed on *Game of*

ILLUSTRATION BY **MARIE BERGERON**

Thrones. Last year gave us the first semi-erect penis on TV (on Netflix's *Easy*) and the first nothing-left-to-the-imagination depiction of oral sex (on Starz's *The Girlfriend Experience*).

Put simply, we're living in a golden age of TV nudity. But are today's productions using the same sexposition playbook as *Game of Thrones,* or are they venturing into uncharted territory? Is it just nudity-by-numbers, or are they aiming for something more revelatory than, say, soft-core porn with better dialogue?

Karley Sciortino maintains it's the latter. "The nudity being shot for TV today is much rawer and messier and more improvised," says the writer and actress who has done full-frontal nudity on Netflix's *Easy,* including in that groundbreaking boner scene. "They don't shoot scenes with angles that make your tits look perfect."

She prefers sex scenes that reflect what actually takes place in the bedrooms of human beings. "Sex is clumsy sometimes," Sciortino says. "People can't get the condom on, or they start laughing. There's a great moment in the first season of *Easy* where these people are having a threesome, and there's a baby monitor in the room. The baby starts crying, so everybody stops, and they go take care of the baby and then come back. I was like, 'Yeah, that's real life.' "

On her new show, the Steven Soderbergh–produced *Now Apocalypse* (Starz again), Sciortino works behind the scenes as a co-writer and creator, and the cast isn't shy about discussing their limits. "There are a lot of conversations on the set about consent," she says. "They're not just having those

"A lot of scripts don't have more direction for a sex scene than 'They go for it.' "

discussions—they're leading them. Once you create a safe space where actors feel they're in charge, they're more willing to take risks."

That's very different from just a few years ago, when the climate on TV productions, even at its best, wasn't about making actors feel safe. During filming for the first season of the HBO series *Westworld* in 2015, nude extras were asked to sign a consent form that warned them they'd be engaging in "graphic sexual situations" that would likely involve "genital-to-genital touching" and posing "on all fours while others who are fully nude ride on your back," among other acts. When the form was made public, HBO insisted it had been written by a casting agency without HBO approval.

Esmé Bianco, who plays the frequently nude prostitute Ros over several early seasons of *Game of Thrones*—as a refresher, she was featured in the season one tryst coached by Littlefinger—has only praise for how she was treated by the director and producers. But she also has moments of post-MeToo hindsight.

"You really had to be your own advocate back then," she says. "If there was something I didn't want to do, I'd have to speak up in front of the entire crew, which was predominantly men. That's really difficult in a job that's so competitive, and nobody wants to be seen as a troublemaker."

Today, actresses don't have to make those difficult decisions alone. HBO hired longtime stunt performer and fight director Alicia Rodis to serve as the network's first "intimacy coordinator." Working on shows including the upcoming *Watchmen* series—the TV adaptation created by showrunner Damon Lindelof, who's such a fan of on-screen nudity that he claims the vanity license plate on his car reads FFRNTL—as well as *The Deuce* and *Crashing,* she acts as a liaison between the actors and the director, making sure the sex scenes involve more oversight than "a cock sock and a prayer," she says.

But it's not just about letting the actors have more input on how much skin they reveal. "What looks good on a screen can be very different from what feels good," Rodis says. "A lot of scripts don't have much more direction for a sex scene than 'They go for it.' But that's not helpful to an actor. That just means do what you'd do in the bedroom. But what works in the bedroom doesn't always read on camera. It's like stunts. You're not actually going to punch someone in the face. You have to cheat it to the camera in a certain way."

Her job isn't just about protecting actors but facilitating more believable sex scenes. "I'm not walking onto a set and trying to get everyone into down jackets," she says. "I want more sex

Opposite top: *Jamie (Sam Heughan) and Claire (Caitriona Balfe) heat up the sheets on Starz's time-travel drama Outlander.* ***Opposite bottom:*** *A client (Siddhartha Rajan) gets to know escort Sally (Karley Sciortino) on Netflix's anthology series Easy.* ***Above:*** *Takeshi Kovacs (Joel Kinnaman) goes face-to-face with a dancer on Netflix's dystopian sci-fi series Altered Carbon.* ***Below:*** *Lyn (Melissa Barrera) lounges on Vida, Starz's coming-of-age drama.*

scenes. But let's do them right. It comes down to giving actors better direction, and that can be as subtle as asking them, 'Could you alter your hip movement to a swivel instead of a pop?' "

Sciortino isn't convinced that what TV sex needs is more choreography. "You have to be careful not to over-monitor to the point where it becomes sterilized," she says. "Acting needs enough room for spontaneity. These intimacy coordinators are great, but actors should also have the freedom to lose themselves in a moment."

Emilia Clarke, who has been repeatedly naked as the Mother of Dragons on *Game of Thrones,* has gone out of her way to justify why her nudity on the show is not just narratively necessary but empowering. "It was naked, but it was strong," she told Stephen Colbert in 2016, explaining why Daenerys needed to emerge sans clothing from a fiery inferno after smiting her enemies.

Jemima Kirke, a regular on the HBO series *Girls* who never shied away from being naked on camera, doesn't feel so strongly that every instance of nudity needs to be fraught with significance. "Nudity doesn't need to be sexual," she says. "But it doesn't need to be empowering either."

Kirke's most memorable unclothed moment on *Girls* involves her casually eating yogurt while lounging naked on a couch, and she'd like to see more of that unremarkable nudity, where actors go au naturel just because being naked is part of being human. "If you're an actor, then your body is there for telling stories," says Kirke, who also shot several nude scenes in the recent film *Untogether.* "I don't think anything should be off-limits. I don't mind being objectified. That's my job as an actress. I'm a part of the visual story."

Sex on TV isn't going anywhere. If anything, we'll be seeing even more flesh on the small screen in the coming year. But it's not about how much square footage of naked skin is allowed or how graphically the sex is simulated; it's about actors being heard. "We want to keep everyone safe," Rodis says, "but there's also an artistry in this. The actors aren't just props. They should be involved in the decision-making."

She remembers one of her first days on the set of *The Deuce*. She was sitting with an actress—she declines to name her—who was preparing to do a nude scene. "She seemed a little distracted," Rodis says. "So I asked her, 'Are you okay?' She was like, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'I know this is an emotionally volatile and very sexual scene. Are you okay with all of this?' She looked at me and said, 'You know, I've been doing this for 20 years, and I think that's the first time anyone's ever asked me that.' " ■

GOOD

A visit to Japan's premier dildo bar, an underground sanctuary where women are free to talk openly—and positively—about sex in an otherwise hush-hush culture

BY
SELENA HOY

I am surrounded by a sea of dildos: purple ones and black ones, footlongs and pocket-size. Some of them vibrate; some rotate. Some have botanic-looking extensions, like sea anemones and exotic flowers. Some are shaped like rabbits, and others look like teddy bears. I'm inspecting a particularly eerie one with a face molded on its silicone tip when the bartender passes me a small pink device. It heats up and vibrates at different intensities via remote control.

Unless previously informed about Vibe Bar Wild One, in Tokyo's Shibuya ward, one would have difficulty imagining its interior: Hundreds of phalluses line plush velvet booths on the third floor of an unremarkable structure, its location announced by a modest sign. The weathered building, accessed via a dingy alley near the Shibuya railway station, is part of the Dogenzaka neighborhood. The bar hovers above a pachinko parlor, a convenience store and some cheap taverns. Upstairs, a sign at the entrance proudly declares WOMEN AND COUPLES ONLY. There is a buzzer, of course.

Opened in 2013, Vibe Bar is a shrine to female pleasure in a country where people aren't having much sex. A 2015 study by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research showed that in Japan, 42 percent of men and 44 percent of women ages 18 to 34 who had never been married were virgins. Are people choosing alternatives to long-term partners? Indeed, Dogenzaka is home to several hostess bars that employ primarily female staffs to serve drinks and carry on intimate and flirty conversations. Strip joints, massage parlors and "soaplands" (a euphemism for *brothels*), all bathed in pink neon, are within walking distance of one another. But most of these cater to men. Vibe Bar, run by a staff of just five women, is the outlier.

"There are a lot of places for men to play, but there aren't that many places for women to talk openly about sex and be relatively safe," says Yuka Izumi, who handles Vibe Bar's events, public relations and bar management. "We thought it would be good to have such a place."

VIBES ONLY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **NIKO WU**

Alexandra Hambleton, an assistant professor of Japanese studies specializing in media and gender at Bunkyo Gakuin University in Tokyo, asserts that Japan's current sexual culture is a reaction to the country's complicated history with the sex trade. "Female sexuality has long been viewed as something to be used by men. Women are supposed to be shy and coy and be convinced to have sex, as you see in a lot of porn," she says. "Women are not supposed to be the subject of their own sexuality."

Historically, the practice of selling an apprentice geisha's virginity was not unheard of. Additionally, from 1932 to 1945, the Imperial Japanese Army forced women in occupied territories into sexual servitude, and military brothels remained state-sponsored businesses until 1946. After Japan's surrender in World War II, General Douglas MacArthur, the newly anointed Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, abolished the licensed prostitution system. At the end of the war, however, the Japanese government destroyed many of the relevant documents in hopes of erasing evidence of the women who had died from rape, suicide or sexually transmitted diseases in the preceding years.

What remained was Article 175 of the Penal Code of Japan, a piece of prewar legislation that forbids the distribution of "indecent" materials. As part of an effort to transform an embarrassing and violent sexual history, Article 175's prohibitions can be extended to sex toys. Under Japanese law, anything that comes into contact with the genitals must be classified as a medical device and requires government approval. Adult goods are still sold, but not openly.

Vibe Bar's front door is locked. This extra layer of security isn't a mistake.

It is only now, perhaps in response to sexual deprivation, that women have slowly begun to combat restrictions on their sexual freedom. "I'm past 40, but in my generation it took a lot of courage for a young woman to go to an adult-goods store by herself and buy a sex toy," Izumi says.

By her estimation, clerks in adult shops are "about 90 percent men," and most of the products are geared toward men as well. "Even if women come to purchase things and want to ask about the goods, if the employee is male, it's not likely that he has actually used the goods," Izumi says. "He won't know if it feels good or not, and he can't get to the core of the conversation."

Businesses like Vibe Bar hope to shrink this longtime void. According to Hambleton, the recent boom in women's sex toys in Japan, which has a GDP of almost $5 trillion, is commerce-driven. "The only place anyone is able to explore female sexuality, even in a slightly feminist way, is within the marketplace," she says. "It's problematic in that it's commercialized—but it gives people a space that doesn't exist anywhere else."

• • •

Vibe Bar's front door is locked. This extra layer of security isn't a mistake. It's important that women who want to own their sexuality take additional precautions, as many can be "subject to threats," according to Hambleton.

After ringing the buzzer, I'm admitted to the bar. The first thing I notice is that the foyer's doorway resembles a giant labia. The walls are decorated with *shunga* murals, or fantastical erotic woodblock illustrations of sensual pleasures featuring kimono-clad couples mid-coitus. An inviting glow radiates from the endless vibrators, which are accompanied by a variety of flavored lubes. Izumi tells me the decor is inspired by a womb. After returning to the beginning and learning about sex, gender, pleasure and yourself, "you open the door and are reborn with a new erotic knowledge," she says.

"A lot of men here don't prioritize sex. They work late hours and don't have that much energy when they finish work. It's easier to just watch porn and give themselves pleasure than to actually meet up with a woman," says a woman I'll call Kim. She has been dating in Japan for 18 years. "Women seem to be more content

with their vibrators than dealing with men, because it seems like men can't be bothered." Her observations are backed up by the results of a 2017 Japan Family Planning Association survey, which concluded that 47 percent of married people hadn't had sex for a month or more. Thirty-five percent of men cited "exhaustion from work"; women's top response, at 22 percent, was sex is "too much trouble."

Unlike in the United States, in Japan it is uncommon to speak openly about sex. Sex education, beyond teaching basic biological functions, is not required in public schools. "That's why people like to go to hostess clubs," says Rinda (not her real name), who used to work in such bars. "Because somebody will kind of lead the conversation and you're allowed to talk about sex, whereas in normal life I don't think you can really do that."

While the country outside Vibe's walls continues to struggle with conversations about sex, the bar's staff of self-educated vibe sommeliers is more than happy to answer questions, give recommendations and talk specs. There's even a diagram of the female anatomy printed on the menu, alongside a list of cocktails including cassis oolong and Calpis-hai, a yogurt-based soft drink with a shot of shochu.

As for the most popular items at Vibe Bar, Izumi points to silicone cups with rotating attachments for nipple stimulation, and a vibrator shaped to massage the G-spot. Both products are among the 350 toys on display—toys that customers can touch, examine and even compare notes on with other customers.

Beyond providing customer service, staffers continually present new products. Their varied backgrounds, including an adult-goods-company employee, an S&M queen and a member of the LGBTQ community, inform their expertise. While the bar itself is not a shop—think of it more like a Tesla showroom—once a customer is ready, she can go to one of seven Wild One shops or order products through an online portal under the same ownership. And because the Wild One company, which has been operating since 1991, has so many brick-and-mortar locations in Tokyo, it receives plenty of customer feedback to help it develop new products. For example: "A lot of people in Japan live with their parents, so we get requests for items that are battery controlled and silent," Izumi says. "If it's too noisy, they're afraid it might vibrate to the next room, or if it's chargeable, they're afraid their parents might find out."

Should more of these establishments pop up, Hambleton predicts, women who were once afraid would finally have a way to explore and experiment. "They'd find they weren't the only people thinking about these things and discover they weren't the only women who were masturbating. For women who may have grown up not being able to talk openly about their sexuality, that is a powerful discovery." ■

ART AT THE EDGE OF T

More than 1,500 people jubilantly shed their clothes last June for Dark Mofo's annual nude swim. The event occurs at dawn after the winter solstice, when Hobart, Tasmania experiences the longest night of any city in Australia.

HE EARTH

How two festivals, one museum and an eccentric gambler's sex-and-death-themed vision are quietly transforming Tasmania into one of the world's most titillating art destinations

BY **CHARLES SHAFAIEH** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JESSE HUNNIFORD & RÉMI CHAUVIN**

Moments before dawn on the morning after the southern hemisphere's winter solstice, more than 1,500 people, wearing only towels and red swimming caps, crowded onto a narrow beach in Hobart, Tasmania—one of the southernmost cities in the world. As the pink and orange pastel glow of the sunrise bathed the crowd, a voice over a loudspeaker announced, "Now is the time: Take your clothes off!" A thunderous beat dropped, as did the towels, and with a collective scream that perfectly echoed the screeching gulls overhead, the swimmers threw themselves into the bracing waters of the River Derwent. Seconds later they reemerged, wearing expressions of ecstatic triumph. One newscaster, securing his towel, ran to kiss his wife and baby. "Saw some people from work," he said. "We're best friends now!"

This inclusive, anarchic spirit is fueling an increase in Tasmania tourism, local and international, exceeding that of other Australian states. Universally acknowledged as an instigator of this shift is the Museum of Old and New Art, or MONA, opened in 2011 by local mathematician and professional gambler David Walsh. A short ferry ride upriver from Hobart in the suburb of Glenorchy, MONA has succeeded beyond even Walsh's predictions—it has had nearly 3 million visitors to date—and now sustains two music-and-arts festivals: Mona Foma in the January summer, and the more gothic Dark Mofo in the June winter, for which the mass cold-plunge skinny-dip has become a trademark event.

Featuring exhibitions of such heavyweight artists as Marina Abramović and Matthew Barney, MONA's gallery, a labyrinthine space carved into a Triassic stone cliff, eschews museum conventions such as wall labels and, says Walsh, the tendency to ignore the two biological imperatives that drive people to make art: "fucking and killing." It also pushes against the digitization of experience with the large-scale and sensorially disorienting works in its permanent collection, cheekily named "Monanism." Take James Turrell's *Unseen Seen,* a kaleidoscopic light-based installation inside a giant white sphere. Walsh describes Turrell's art as "heroin but without the side effects." (Participants are required to sign waivers before entering.)

Australian sculptor Greg Taylor's *Cunts…and other conversations*—a series of 151 life-size porcelain casts of vaginas spotlit along a darkened pathway—highlights in its scale each body part's individuality as well as the absurdity of censoring the female body on social media and elsewhere. Women can be overheard telling companions about finding their double. (Versions of the sculptures also appear in the gift shop, as vagina-shaped hand soap.)

Walsh, 57, whose fast-paced, irreverent speech and shoulder-length gray hair bring to mind Scottish comic Billy Connolly, made a fortune as a gambler using quantitative analysis. He has a savant-level understanding of probability and contends that human life is governed by chance. "The worst decision I ever made was the first bet I placed, because there was a three to five percent chance that it would have made me a compulsive gambler and destroyed my life," he says, sitting at MONA's Faro restaurant, where bartenders pour charcoal-black margaritas garnished with feral-pig eyeballs frozen in ice. "There was only one chance in a million or less that it would have made me wealthy."

Left and top: For the 2018 Société Anonyme costume ball, Dark Mofo occupied the heavily ornamented, Victorian-era Hadley's Orient Hotel in downtown Hobart. Evoking the film *Eyes Wide Shut* with its unrestrained hedonism, the food-and-flesh-filled bash spread throughout the hotel's common areas and guest rooms.

Melbourne artist Greg Taylor's *Cunts...* is part of Monanism, the museum's general collection. More than 1,900 MONA works come from founder David Walsh's private collection.

"Why can't darkness be good? The night is a time to dream."

Much of Dark Mofo's winter-solstice-inspired programming happens after the sun goes down, including Winter Feast, a seven-night riverside banquet that celebrates cooking with fire. The festival returns to Hobart in June.

Walsh, a gifted mathematician, is a leader of the Bank Roll, which Australian newspapers have described as the world's biggest gambling syndicate. The mysterious millionaire has parlayed his preoccupation into a bona fide art empire.

From straddling plastic sheep on the ferry ride to the site, to drinking margaritas garnished with frozen pigs' eyeballs (quickly, before they melt), MONA is a museum experience like no other. It will even inter your ashes for $50,000.

Walsh's luck reverberates beyond MONA. International travel to Tasmania rose 18 percent in 2017 alone. In addition to the farmers' stalls at the sprawling outdoor Salamanca Market (still Tasmania's most-visited attraction; MONA is second), an ever-growing number of farm-to-table restaurants are benefiting from the surge. And in December, MONA announced plans for Motown, a roughly $287 million mini-village featuring a five-star hotel, playground, theater, outdoor performance space, library and spa designed by Turrell and Abramović that could open as soon as 2024.

For now, the two festivals, both overseen by Walsh, remain the most distinctive MONA-affiliated events as much for the diversity of their offerings as for their democratic atmosphere, with no VIP areas or exorbitant ticket prices. Mona Foma, curated since its 2009 inception by Violent Femmes bassist Brian Ritchie, has welcomed Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Amanda Palmer and Gotye, as well as more experimental work such as Eve Klein's *Vocal Womb,* in which the opera singer performed while the interior of her body was projected onstage via a laryngoscope.

Among the dozens of acts at this year's Mona Foma were Grammy-nominated indie rocker Courtney Barnett; composer and sound artist Nick Ryan, who translated the movement of 27,000 pieces of space junk into sound; and Australian black-metal project Striborg, teamed with the Australian Art Orchestra.

Despite Mona Foma's appeal as an escape from the northern hemisphere winter, the standout at this remote location is the

Dark Mofo festival's subversive curatorial mission. Founding creative director Leigh Carmichael sees it as a chance to reclaim darkness. The two-week-long citywide event celebrates all things transcendent, ecstatic and primal: "Why can't darkness be good?" Carmichael asks. "I understand why it's used as a metaphor for evil, but it isn't actually. It's also sublime. The night is a time to dream."

David Lynch serves as a frequent inspiration. Last year's festival featured a re-creation of *Twin Peaks*'s Bang Bang Bar—part of the immersive Night Mass spread over five venues in central Hobart—and performances by Lynch muses Rebekah Del Rio and Chrysta Bell. The seminal industrial group Einstürzende Neubauten has become a repeat guest, along with a program of experimental operas, metal bands and frequently unclassifiable performers.

Dark Mofo's often provocative artistic interventions, such as *Siren Song* in 2017, also separate it from Mona Foma's music-focused programming and, Carmichael believes, serve as its most remarkable aspect. Every day of the 2017 festival, for seven minutes at dawn and dusk, an ethereal composition burst forth from speakers throughout downtown. Few complained; apparently much of this city's population of more than 200,000 has embraced projects one would expect to be tolerated only at more remote festivals like Burning Man.

But not everyone appreciates the spectacle. A recent real-estate boom, influenced in part by the tourism boost, has seen Hobart surpass Sydney as Australia's least affordable city for rentals, which could force out local artists. Glenorchy, where MONA is located, remains one of the state's most disadvantaged areas, as tourists typically go directly back to Hobart's more chic restaurants, shops and galleries instead of staying in the suburb. And local Christians took issue with the 33-foot-tall red neon inverted crosses installed along the Hobart waterfront for last year's Dark Mofo. Hobart's then lord mayor, Ron Christie, sought to withdraw financial support for what he called the "shock festival."

Last year the city council approved a performance by 73-year-old Sydney-based artist Mike Parr. For three days, Parr buried himself without food in a 25-square-foot steel room underneath a busy downtown street. The piece's metaphoric resonance of buried knowledge has a universal quality, but in Tasmania it evoked the island's violent history: In the first half of the 19th century, 90 percent of Tasmania's indigenous population was massacred by European colonists in the Black War—an attempted genocide that remains unrecognized by the national government and unknown even to many Australians. More than 3,000 people gathered as Parr descended beneath the street, a truck quickly sealed him in with asphalt and the first cars began driving over the chamber. In the crowd, various Aboriginal groups both shouted support and peacefully protested the action. The divide prompted discussions on neglected history that could be heard in coffee shops and restaurants throughout Hobart, among metalheads, visiting visual artists and locals alike.

Traveling from the United States for upward of an entire day to visit an island of whooping and wailing nude swimmers and an unapologetically sex-and-death-forward museum may seem counterintuitive—but for Walsh, that's the whole idea. "Comfort can never change your viewpoint," he says. "You can stay home and watch a good show on Netflix and be almost certain to have a decent time, or you can go to a most likely bad, difficult artwork at Dark Mofo that isn't satisfying anyone—but there's a one in 1,000 chance that it will change your life. There's no chance Netflix will."

Familiar pleasures are easy to find, but they can narcotize you into a state of complacency. Enduring a long atonal concert or taking part in a sacrificial ritual may infuriate you but, in doing so, make you look at your surroundings differently, whether you're home or at the edge of the world. "Just because you have a shit time 999 times out of 1,000 doesn't mean you shouldn't do something," Walsh says. "It means you should." ■

Above: Performance duo Inner Course engages bystanders in "complicit acts of mindful reprieve" at Mona Foma 2019. **Right:** Swedish singer-songwriter Neneh Cherry co-headlined the January event, which was held in the city of Launceston for the first time this year.

Right: Audio-visual artist Robin Fox's *Launceston Constellation* showers visitors with interlocking laser beams that interact with sound. **Below:** Local artist Amanda Parer channeled Rodin when she created *Man*, a 423-cubic-foot floating sculpture, for the summer festival.

Opposite top: Visitors to James Turrell's *Unseen Seen* are required to enter in pairs, sign waivers and carry panic buttons because of the piece's potentially overwhelming hallucinogenic effect. People have later reported feeling nostalgic for the stranger with whom they entered. **Opposite bottom:** Walsh has called MONA a "subversive adult Disneyland." Case in point: Randy Polumbo's *Grotto*, a kaleidoscopic room Walsh has christened the "selfie capital of the museum."

Man in His Domain

THE REVEREND WILLIAM J. BARBER II

Commemorating what would have been Martin Luther King Jr.'s 90th birthday, Barber spoke at Stanford University's Memorial Church in January. The name of the event: Where Do We Go From Here?

BY **AMANDA PETRUSICH**

FROM HIS PULPIT IN GOLDSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA, THIS PROGRESSIVE PREACHER IS MUSTERING AN ARMY OF LOVE—COMPRISING SAINTS, SINNERS AND EVERYONE IN BETWEEN

The precise origin of Watch Night—a New Year's Eve prayer service, common in Southern black churches, in which a congregation assembles to recall the moment the calendar flipped from 1862 to 1863 and Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation became law—is murky, but the sentiment involved is consonant with the season: Let us gather to celebrate the thrill of change and the promise of renewal.

This past December 31, at the Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, parishioners had filled most of the pews by 6:30 P.M. Latecomers jockeyed for standing room near the back. A banner stretching from one end of the balcony to the other read POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN: A NATIONAL CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL. A camera crew snaked power cords up and down the pulpit stairs, preparing for a live internet broadcast. The crowd was a mix of regular churchgoers, graying activists and young couples in expensive eyeglasses. Buttons broadcasting liberal causes and catchphrases (LOVE TRUMPS HATE, BLACK LIVES MATTER, NASTY WOMAN) were abundant.

The night's headliner was the minister and activist William J. Barber II—newly minted MacArthur Fellow, former president of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP and co-chair of the revived Poor People's Campaign, a movement conceived by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1967. Barber and I were scheduled to meet for a formal interview before the service, but his brother, Charles Barber, a minister in Georgia, had recently been diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer, and earlier that day the situation had grown grim. One of his colleagues called to say that Barber needed to spend the day with family.

My breath caught as I put my phone back on the hotel nightstand. How could anyone, faced with that kind of news, address a sprawling congregation, let alone send it into a new year armed with hope?

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Barber was born in 1963, in Indianapolis. Around his fifth birthday, his parents moved him from Indiana to a segregated kindergarten in Washington County, deep in North Carolina's so-called black belt. His father had grown up there and wanted to help desegregate the state's public school system. He became one of the first black teachers in the county; Barber's mother was the school's first black office manager. (She still works there: "The great-grandchildren of some people who called her nigger when we first came now call her Mama Barber," Barber writes in his book, *The Third Reconstruction.*) On weekends, his father traveled around the state, holding revivals in one-room churches. "He was sharing the gospel message that gave him hope, believing that it was good news for others as well," Barber writes. "But at the same time he was also building connections as an organizer."

The elder Barber's decision to move his young family to the segregated South demonstrated his conviction that faith and activism are inextricable. "He believed that racism was against the imago Dei, the image of God in every person, and that systemic racism and poverty were forms of false worship, idol worship, the worship of self over the care for all humanity," Barber tells me, speaking over the phone two weeks into the new year. "My parents could have stayed in the Midwest, but they chose to bring me to a segregated kindergarten. They came because a black principal asked them to come back home, and Daddy said that he accepted what he believed was a Macedonian call. In the Bible, the poor Christians said to Paul, 'Come help us.' And he did."

Barber's home base is the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, about 55 miles southeast of Raleigh. If you listen to old sermons recorded on crackly 78 rpm discs in the 1920s and 1930s—preachers like the Reverend J.M. Gates of Atlanta hollering about how "death's black train is coming"—you'll recognize Barber's heavy, undulating cadences, the repetition of key phrases, the call-and-response rhythms, the rich, intoxicating music of his voice. The North Carolina–based writer Benjamin Hedin, author of the 2015 book *In Search of the Movement: The Struggle for Civil Rights Then and Now,* contextualizes Barber's rhetorical powers within the civil rights movement. "I think oratory is the proper tradition in which to place Barber, rather than activist or nonviolent apostle," he tells me. "Barber's place is to offer from the pulpit, where it has traditionally been offered, a source of hope and renewal and moral clarity. It actualizes all the hope and aspirations society by itself cannot."

Barber considers Duke professor and theologian William C. Turner one of the greatest influences on his spiritual life, and in conversation he's quick to cite Turner's comments about the link between belief and boots-on-the-ground advocacy: "Whatever you call it—being born again, touched by the spirit, moved by the divine, baptized in the water—whatever you call your 'religious experience,' if it does not initiate a quarrel with the world, and a quarrel with injustice, and a quarrel with

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK**

hatred, and a quarrel with discrimination, and a quarrel with division, then your claim to have had a religious experience is terribly suspect."

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Barber is nothing if not cognizant of the difference between words and deeds. In 2013 he became known nationally for his involvement in the Moral Mondays campaign, in which he led the peaceful occupation of the North Carolina capitol building. The action got national press, perhaps because it demonstrated Barber's singular ability to balance faith, activism and an intersectionality that can surprise casual atheists and traditional believers alike.

Pat McCrory, the state's new Republican governor, was determined to attack policies designed to protect the poor or otherwise disenfranchised: He slashed unemployment benefits, signed a bill that opted North Carolina out of an expanded Medicaid program and repealed the Racial Justice Act, which had allowed death row inmates to challenge their convictions if they believed they had been subject to racial discrimination. He also deregulated mountaintop fracking, eliminated tenure for public-school teachers, tried to prevent public health insurance policies from covering abortions and, in 2016, signed something called the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, a bit of legislation that, among other things, contained directives regarding bathroom use: Per its dictates, in government buildings people could use only the bathrooms that corresponded with the sex printed on their birth certificates.

The Moral Mondays protests eventually spread to other districts and cities; more than 1,000 people, including Barber, were arrested in the first two years. In 2016, McCrory lost the election to Roy Cooper, a Democrat, making him the first sitting governor to blow a regular general reelection campaign in North Carolina since 1850. He later blamed his defeat on "the non-citizen vote," though it was almost certainly due to the economic fallout following his endorsement of the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act. News organizations estimated that it cost the state more than 1,750 jobs and more than $77 million in investments and other spending, after corporations including PayPal and Deutsche Bank froze their expansion plans, Bruce Springsteen and Ringo Starr canceled concerts there and the NCAA excluded the state from hosting playoff games.

In 2016 Barber again commanded national attention, during a 10-minute speech at the Democratic National Convention. He shuffled onstage in a dark suit and a lavender shirt. His beard was closely cropped and flecked with gray. He began, "I'm a preacher, and I'm a theologically conservative liberal evangelical biblicist." The crowd seemed uncertain how to receive this. "I work to conserve a divine tradition that teaches us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God," he went on. "I'm worried by the way faith is cynically used by some to serve hate, fear, racism and greed." The crowd swooned. A headline in *The Washington Post* declared, THE REV. WILLIAM BARBER DROPPED THE MIC.

Barber's work is staunchly nondenominational, and he welcomes individuals who are repulsed by institutionalized religion, have been cast out of their churches, are scarred by the right's long-standing co-option of "morality" or find the very notion of God absurd. "Our movement is not asking people to be Christian. When we talk about morality, we're not just talking about Christianity. That's not even my only entry point; it's *an* entry point," Barber says. "We have black, white, brown, native, Asian, atheist, people of faith, people not of faith, young, old, gay, straight. A moral fusion movement is not about people becoming Christian, or any particular faith. A moral fusion movement says, 'Listen, there are some issues that aren't left versus right, Democrat versus Republican, but right versus wrong.'"

In addition to his role at Greenleaf, Barber is president of Repairers of the Breach, a nonprofit that takes its name from a portion of Isaiah 58:12 ("Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in"). The issues he cares about the most—voter suppression, endemic poverty, health care—he sees as moral obligations, which we have heretofore collectively failed to prioritize or demand. Donald Trump's presidency is merely a symptom of the moral void at the nation's center, he insists, and hardly the cause of it. He reminds me that violence against the poor both preceded and will outlast this administration.

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Cornel West, also a decorated theologian, was an early supporter of Barber's work. "He is a spiritual giant, a great freedom fighter and a grand organic intellectual," West told me recently. "He puts a smile on Martin Luther King's face from the grave. I have great love and respect for him." Comparisons to King are not uncommon.

In a way, Barber's work is predicated on the idea that morality is self-evident. For decades, American popular culture has normalized self-idolatry and individualism, to the point that it's now widely seen as a virtue: "I'ma worry 'bout me, give a fuck about you" is how Drake puts it in "Started From the Bottom," which remains (even if Drake is Canadian) as good a parable of the American dream as anything. America was founded on promises of independence and self-betterment, yet Barber is suggesting we should worry less about ourselves and more about our neighbors. His message is radical insofar as it requires a significant recalibration of the American psyche—away from grotesque exaggerations of the Horatio Alger myth and toward the promise of Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" mounted inside the Statue of Liberty.

Barber can be a challenging subject, in large part because he's resistant to letting his ego overshadow the movement. He has submitted to his work so fully, it's difficult to cleave the man from the mission. It seems obvious Barber's advocacy comes at a personal cost, yet he's preternaturally adept at contextualizing his suffering in a way that inevitably diminishes it. His pain, whether physical, internal or existential, can always be

"WHEN WE TALK ABOUT MORALITY, WE'RE NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT CHRISTIANITY."

managed. (The physical pain is very real: Barber suffers from ankylosing spondylitis, an inflammatory disease that, over time, causes the vertebrae of the spine to fuse.) This too feels radical in an era of incessant broadcasting, in which the airing of grievances is its own online pastime.

When I ask Barber if he ever fears for his safety—after Charleston and in light of massacres everywhere—he is reluctant to answer. "I look at violence in two forms," he finally replies. "And I'll say it quickly. When Coretta Scott King was asked about violence after her husband's murder, she said, 'Yes, but there are other forms of violence, like denying health care, denying education, denying culture, denying a living wage, denying labor rights.' Another form of violence is an apathetic attitude that refuses to address these other forms of violence. So I've experienced that kind of violence, first of all. But then, yes, I've also experienced the violence of...." He pauses. "I don't talk about it a lot or give glory to it, but I've received notes that say things like 'You're in the dead pool; you'll be dead by Christmas.' I've seen the ugly, ugly things on the internet. I received some of that stuff in 2011, before Trump was ever around. But that's not the me I want folks to know."

He is similarly reserved when I ask if he's considering a presidential bid. "I don't really have any desire to hold political office," he says. But he is quickly energized as he segues to thoughts of the future, forecasting a movement peopled by citizens "who are willing to put their bodies on the line, their mouths to work, who are willing to lose their pulpits" to spread the essential message "that change has happened, change is happening, change can happen, change will happen and that *we* are the people."

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On New Year's Eve, Barber's sermon was preceded by at least an hour of singing and remarks from half a dozen other speakers, including the Reverend Liz Theoharis, his co-chair in the Poor People's Campaign. (She wore a clerical stole over her ministerial robes that read JESUS WAS A POOR MAN.) "We never have a stage at a Poor People's Campaign event where a person stands by themselves," Barber says. "That's intentional. And we never talk about any one issue separate from any other, so that we're not fighting in silos."

When he finally rose to speak—he had been sitting on the side of the stage, watching and listening, nodding, occasionally offering a quiet "That's right!"—he acknowledged that his day had been arduous. He then delivered a 45-minute sermon that gathered strength as it went, like a slab of snow cascading into an avalanche. He made the case that people helping one another on a national scale is possible. It shouldn't even be that hard. Reorganize the budgets; resist gerrymandering; make sure every citizen is healthy and allowed to vote.

By the end, I was dizzy. We filed outside. Midnight was still three hours away. People shook hands in the cold, wishing each other well in the forthcoming year.

A few days into January, Barber's brother passed away. "If he was going, it was a blessing that he was able to die with his mama singing the songs of the church to him," Barber tells me. His voice, that assured baritone, now sounds thin, and it quavers as he describes the funeral. But as it did in Raleigh, it gathers an inexorable momentum as he delves deeper into his work and his faith—how we can change and why we need to. Listening to him on the phone, as in the pulpit on New Year's Eve, I feel awake, and hopeful. ■

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **KATIE BAILIE**

PLAYBOY *Advisor*

Sex writer ***Maria Del Russo*** advises a woman who has a knee-jerk reaction to her boyfriend's need to jerk. Plus, advice on dressing up, turning off and going deeper during sex

Q: *How many women watch porn and masturbate with their boyfriends? Online sex therapists seem to routinely advocate this practice, but I haven't met a single woman who actually engages in it. Here's my story: My boyfriend and I have a healthy sex life, but he admits that he masturbates to relieve stress. He loves porn, and he says he never looks at photos of me when he's flying solo because he doesn't want our intimacy to be "superficial." I'm already insecure about my body, and I know I'll never live up to the women he's watching. I'm not a big fan of porn, nor do I need to masturbate when I'm in a relationship. Should I let him continue to do his thing, vocalize my insecurity or suggest mutual masturbation (and possibly humiliate myself in the process)?—E.V., London, U.K.*

A: Let's begin by acknowledging the utility of porn. Pornography is consumed largely as a stimulant for getting off—not, as you seem to fear, as a substitute for sex or as a standard of attractiveness. Couples may choose to watch porn together to set the mood. Some masturbate while watching it, others don't. Some watch together because they find it titillating, others because it's intriguing, and the rest do it because it's funny.

In short, regardless of your relationship status, there are many reasons to watch porn. One thing is certain, though: Women absolutely partake alongside their boyfriends. Based on my research, few comprehensive surveys on this subject have been published, but with nearly 100 million people visiting Pornhub every day, it would not be unreasonable to assume that some of those visitors are couples in healthy relationships.

You should be grateful that your boyfriend is so forthcoming about his porn-viewing habits; he's essentially handing you his unlocked iPhone. His relationship with porn and masturbation, as you describe it, seems to be a non-threatening one, given how he views them as separate from intercourse even though they're just as integral to his emotional well-being. By the way, science is on his side: The mental-health benefits of masturbation include reduced stress, better-quality sleep and improved concentration.

You, on the other hand, seem to have a more, let's say *nuanced,* relationship with masturbation, porn, sex and self-esteem. It's important to be open with your partner about your insecurities—physical, emotional and sexual—because he who loves you may be able to help you overcome them. Forcing him into your comfort zone by giving him an ultimatum isn't the answer. Nor should you suggest mutual masturbation if you're not legitimately curious about it. (He may not even be interested, because, as you suggest, he likes to compartmentalize.) Sexuality is complicated, and even when we have romantic partners, it can be beneficial to experience some of our sexual desires and fantasies alone.

To reinforce why you needn't worry about his habits, allow me to deploy the only kind of metaphor that can compete with sex: food. Sometimes you want nothing more than to slowly savor a succulent 10-ounce Wagyu filet mignon and a glass of cabernet. Other times all you crave is a cold slice of day-old Domino's pizza. In both cases, you're experiencing hunger; your means of satiation are merely circumstantial. Have confidence in knowing that pepperoni could never replace steak—and men *love* steak.

Q: *Technology has created so many ways you can be caught juggling your options: random numbers texting you, a flame calling while you're on another date, women messaging you in the middle of the night, Bumble notifications popping up unexpectedly, people adding you to their Instagram stories without permission. What's the key to being on the grid while dating multiple people?—J.S., Rockford, Illinois*

A: Believe it or not, dating in 2019 is not that difficult. Turn on your phone's "do not disturb" function before your date begins. In reality, the only people who fear being caught dating other people are those who are being deceitful, so your question seems to indicate you want to date in secret. That, my friend, is a zero-sum game in the digital age. Be up-front about your goals with everybody you're dating. Anything else is a waste of your time and theirs. If you just want to have fun, let them know. If you're not ready to be exclusive, let them know. If you have no interest in something long-term, make that clear before having sex.

At this point, most well-adjusted single people expect any social encounter to be interrupted by some form of technology. If you silence all your devices, your date will likely consider it chivalrous and refreshing. By the way, if you're on a first, second or even third date and she demands to know why other women are contacting you, run.

Q: *What's the longest you can go without having sex with your girlfriend before you should worry about the health of your relationship?—R.W., Idaho Falls, Idaho*

A: What you're actually asking is: Is sex a barometer for the strength of a relationship? The answer is no. There's no universal timeline that tracks when a sexless relationship enters the "Holy shit, we're in danger" zone.

Here's the rub: Isn't the guarantee of sex what makes committed relationships so fantastic? Of course it is! Even so, I wouldn't dare suggest that a sexless relationship is an unhealthy one. Libidos ebb and flow. Stress, pregnancy, motherhood, medication and menstrual cycles all have an effect on a woman's sex drive. You should be sensitive to any of these factors, should they apply.

Because you're asking, I assume you're already concerned. Is your girlfriend aware that you're concerned? Does she know your definition of a "healthy" sex life? My advice is to seduce your girlfriend to the best of your ability based on what you know turns her on. Should she demur, it's time to have a dialogue about each others' expectations in the bedroom lest you start looking elsewhere to fulfill your very human needs.

Q: *If I had to make one luxury purchase to impress women, what should it be: a newer car, an expensive TV, a sophisticated wardrobe? I'm middle-income but want to own something that will wow every girl who meets me—something that proves I have class.—B.C., Seattle, Washington*

A: You're reading PLAYBOY, so I assume you already understand that class is defined by attitude, not material goods. How you treat other women, the way you interact with waitstaff and how you talk about your exes and family will woo any well-adjusted woman more than Maseratis or Maison Margiela.

If you want to start *presenting* yourself to the world as a sophisticated man, however, start with a smart wardrobe, which needn't be astronomically expensive but should be an investment—in both time and money. As Will Noguchi, senior visual stylist of men's subscription service Bombfell, advises, "You need to shop smart. This means spending your money on key pieces rather than a wide range of fast-fashion items." He suggests starting with a fitted navy blazer, a classic leather jacket and a pair of dark-wash jeans. Jeans and leather jackets never go out of style; spend some extra money here as these pieces can be worn year-round.

"Aside from versatility," adds Noguchi, "the most important thing to consider when updating your wardrobe is fit. Look for pieces with tailored or tapered fits to alleviate looking boxy. A 'trim' aesthetic will naturally give you a more expensive, elevated look."

Q: *I have been in a relationship for three years, and I recently played a joke on my boyfriend that I now regret. At Christmas, in front of my whole family,*

One of my more infamous dating stories involves spotting a hotter guy across the bar while I was on a date, faking a headache to end said date and then going back to the bar to pick up the hottie.

I got down on one knee while holding a small box and pretended I was proposing to him. (In reality the box contained a small gift for my mom.) My boyfriend, caught off-guard, looked panicked—a reaction I didn't expect. We eventually laughed the whole thing off, but I haven't been able to get the desperate look on his face out of my head. I can't help thinking that he'll never want to marry me someday, in which case what's the point of prolonging our relationship?—S.M., Cambridge, Massachusetts

A: You had it coming. Do you recognize that? Say it with me now: "I recognize I made a mistake. *I do."* Good.

Marriage proposals are nothing to joke about, so consider your turmoil a referendum not only on your sense of humor but on your knowledge of your boyfriend's headspace. I must assume he appeared panicked because you two haven't talked about your future together.

Sit him down and have a conversation about where he sees this going. The two of you have been together for three years; at this juncture, talks of marriage and a proposal should be met with elation—that is, if a life of monogamy is what you both aspire to. Pick a time and place that will allow him to give you his full attention. Don't do it before bed or shout at him from the kitchen while he's watching TV. Get to the point: "Where do you see us in two years? Can you imagine us getting married?" Until you talk to him about his plans for your future, you'll continue to worry yourself with speculation.

Q: *I'm having a hard time sustaining a relationship because I love the chase. I don't go out to bars with men I'm dating because my eyes wander. I recently stopped drinking because I recognized that, for me, getting drunk was synonymous with picking up men and having drunk sex with strangers. This is a pattern. (By the way, it was easy for me to stop drinking, so I don't think I'm an alcoholic.) Do I need to give myself more time to sow my oats, or might I have an intimacy or commitment problem?—R.G., Miami Beach, Florida*

A: Oh, younger self, is that you? One of my more infamous dating stories involves spotting a hotter guy across the bar while I was on a date, faking a headache to end said date and then going back to the bar to pick up the hottie. The question is, Do you consider me talented or unstable?

For me, the chase was a means of avoiding one very real issue. Yes, I was afraid of intimacy, but I was terrified of rejection. When you're constantly looking for the next best thing, there's no way the person sitting across from you can hurt you. This is probably, at least to some extent, why you keep swiping left on men in real life. The thrill of catch and release insulates you from some harsher reality that no sex columnist should attempt to diagnose.

You may not have a drinking problem, but you most certainly have an intimacy problem. I was able to deal with my vulnerability issues through therapy; you might benefit from the same. An even harsher reality check is that for many people who exhibit these patterns, sooner or later their options run out. Don't rob yourself of the gift of getting to know a sexual partner on a deeper level. Fleeting sex, one-night stands, free drinks and first-kiss thrills can sustain you only for so long. I would hate to see what happens should you ever find yourself alone at last call.

Q: *I suffer from vulvar vestibulodynia and struggle with intense pain during penetrative sex. I've been going to physical therapy for a couple of years. I also take duloxetine, which helps control nerve pain, and my condition is slowly improving. I have a long-term partner who is empathetic and concerned about hurting me, so we've been relying almost entirely on clitoral stimulation. I'm ready to try penetration again but have residual anxiety from a lifetime of pelvic-floor dysfunction. How can I ease back into vaginal sex and shift my focus from pain to pleasure?—E.S., Malibu, California*

A: Vulvar vestibulodynia, a form of vulvodynia, is more common than you might think. It has been reported that up to 16 percent of women in the U.S. will experience vulvodynia in their lifetimes. And yet, most women who suffer from this condition do so in silence. It's understandable that you have anxiety around potential pain, and you're lucky to have a supportive partner. He's going to be an important part of reducing your anxiety around sex.

Aside from being forthcoming about any anxiety you or your partner may have, come up with a safe word. Make it something non-pain-related and easy to say and remember. Agree that either of you is allowed to use it if sex gets too painful or if your anxiety starts to spin out of control.

Sex is a form of pleasure, and pleasure takes work and communication, whether you suffer from vulvodynia or not. Every healthy sexual experience begins with a clear mind that's ready to focus on having fun, giving back and letting go. You're lucky to have an amazing partner who seems to want to prioritize your pleasure. Be open to the journey. ■

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PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: SETH ABRAMSON

A candid conversation with America's most dogged pursuer of the Trump-Russia story—a professor, poet and "metamodernist" out to prove collusion

Seth Abramson is a hard fellow to read. A Twitter-savvy commentator on the president's alleged Russia ties and author of the 2018 book *Proof of Collusion: How Trump Betrayed America,* he doesn't look like a natty legal analyst, nor does he come across as an investigative reporter or a goggle-eyed conspiracy theorist living on rage, Adderall and likes. Instead, he could be a regional manager for a call-center chain, wearing roomy jeans, a suit jacket and extremely sensible shoes. Not long ago, he says, he wore nothing but athleisure pieces with sports logos. This suit jacket represents a recent, if only occasional, addition to his ensemble. With his book advance, he also bought a homely new Subaru sedan.

As with the best normcores, Abramson's rejection of style reflects its own punk defiance. Roomy jeans notwithstanding, he knows how to calculate an aesthetic effect. On Twitter, Abramson helped pioneer the literary form of the "thread." Both admired and reviled, the thread uses a string of tweets to create a kind of argument in epigrams. Threads are personality driven, and readers (including hate-readers) of Abramson's tweets have gotten to know the eccentric New Hampshirite through his meticulous attention to the evidence of Trumpworld's alleged collusion with the Kremlin. His threads demonstrate his almost robotic recall and gift for sequential thinking, his love of asterisks as italics and, above all, his sometimes tedious prolificacy. An Abramson thread can run to thousands upon thousands of words, which is no mean feat on a platform meant to inspire thoughts consisting of 280 characters or fewer.

Abramson was born on Halloween 1976, in Concord, Massachusetts. He's a professor of communications art and science at the University of New Hampshire, as well as a published "conceptual poet" and a lawyer with five degrees—a B.A. from Dartmouth, an M.A. and a Ph.D.

"I tend to involve myself in projects that create pretty spectacular threat matrices for a lot of people. I wish it were otherwise."

"The test for us is not 'Can we get to the information?' but 'Do we understand what we're seeing?' "

"I see people on Twitter say to someone writing too much on any subject, 'Don't go all Seth Abramson on this.' "

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS CHURCHILL**

from the University of Wisconsin, an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. As a poet, he has produced adventurous (and often weird) stuff such as a mash-up of many of the cruel things he's been called online. In 2018 he was named a columnist at *Newsweek,* but his position within the fourth estate is unfixed: Not only is he easily dismissed as a lefty Jerome Corsi or Alex Jones, but as a rule media gatekeepers don't like random Twitter freestylers getting unlimited word counts and 600,000 followers. No wonder outlets from *The Atlantic* to *Slate* to *The New Republic* have called Abramson "delusional," "hyperbolic" and stuck in a "conspiracy mind-set."

And yet his case, launched on March 13, 2017 with a so-called "mega-thread" on the Trump-Russia connection, is compelling. If *Proof of Collusion* seems woolly, it's because Trump's relationship with the Kremlin is damned woolly. As of this writing, not one error has been found in the book, which offers what Abramson calls "a theory of the case" of Trump-Russia. The theory? That Trump and his aides conspired with the Kremlin and other hostile powers to exchange control over American foreign policy for money and election help.

PLAYBOY sent **Virginia Heffernan**—a columnist for *Wired* and the *Los Angeles Times,* host of the *Trumpcast* podcast and author of *Magic and Loss: The Internet as Art*—to interview Abramson at a Hilton hotel in Manchester, New Hampshire; he lives nearby with his wife and two dogs. Heffernan reports: "Shortly after we met, Abramson told me that two reporters had recently been dispatched to interview him for what he predicted would be 'hit pieces.' Square and provincial, far from the cliquey Beltway and Manhattan pundits, he's plenty fun to drag. But a funny thing happened to the reporters: They didn't write their hatchet jobs, because they started to... like him. More than that, they started to believe him. As the Department of Justice continues to churn out indictments of major Trumpworld players, slagging journalists who have tirelessly documented the Trump-Russia story has begun to lose its savor.

"In person, it's Abramson's extraordinary kindness, his sly brain and his no-frills charm that get you. The fact that few major media outlets have ever had his back—the late media reporter David Carr once said he'd have no authority if his last name weren't 'of *The New York Times*'—makes him more appealing, not less. He's a midrange sedan amid the sleek BMWs of the cable-news set, and when I'm feeling vertigo in Trump times, it's Seth Abramson I turn to for clarity. His analysis gives me confidence that someday this will end. And maybe there will even be justice."

PLAYBOY: These are uncanny times. I walk through my days as an American thinking, simultaneously, *We're under Russian occupation* and *Another day at the office.* It exerts such a cognitive burden that the relief of seeing you spell it out is a kind of comfort you might not have intended to give.

ABRAMSON: I can honestly say I never thought my writing would comfort anyone. I receive scores of messages every week saying that it has exactly that effect, but my assumption on the front end of writing what I've been writing was that it would irk a large number of people. Even when I'm not writing about the law, my brain has been wired to think like a lawyer and to break down arguments in a particular way that I thought would actually frustrate most people, particularly those who aren't lawyers.

PLAYBOY: But this is the *Playboy Interview*—irk is allowed. Frustration is allowed. Fury is encouraged. You can even cop to impure thoughts, like Jimmy Carter. Think of all the gonzo people who have done this interview: Miles Davis, Vladimir Nabokov, Yoko Ono. You're left-brained gonzo.

ABRAMSON: Or Pynchonesque, some people say.

PLAYBOY: Okay, Pynchonesque, meaning you're in your head and excruciatingly detailed.

ABRAMSON: Normally, if you're a writer and someone tells you you're Pynchonesque, you would be thrilled. But when people describe me as Pynchonesque, they mean I might be seeing connections between signals that are, in fact, completely discrete.

PLAYBOY: And that maybe you're writing fiction.

ABRAMSON: Right.

PLAYBOY: With that in mind, I want you to prove collusion to me.

ABRAMSON: As the left-brained gonzo that I am, the first thing we have to determine is what our frame of reference is. There's a certain amount of information about collusion that would be found compelling in a movie called *Proof of Collusion.* There's information that would hold water in court. There's information that might make a corporate journalist say, "We now have proof of collusion." Then there's a certain amount of evidence that would cause a partisan to change their perspective on the collusion question and say, "Hey, I was wrong: I thought there was collusion, and there isn't," or "I said there was no collusion,

and in fact there is." If we put partisanship aside, I believe there are several dozen incidents in the Trump-Russia timeline that should be received as collusion across any of those paradigms. One example is Donald Trump sitting down with his National Security Advisory Committee on March 31, 2016. One of his advisors, George Papadopoulos, said to the assembled group, roughly, that he had secretly been in contact with agents of the Kremlin and that he had been tasked by these Kremlin agents to act as an intermediary in setting up a secret summit between Trump and the president of Russia that no one will know happened, and that the Kremlin had cleared him to do the scheduling and the logistics and the communication between the two parties to ensure that the two are able to discuss geopolitical complications in American foreign policy without anyone knowing about that conversation.

PLAYBOY: What gives you the confidence to say this is something that really happened?

ABRAMSON: When *The Washington Post* first reported what George Papadopoulos claimed to have communicated to Trump, they phrased it as Papadopoulos revealing himself "as an intermediary for the Russian government." Adding to that, I believe there's the legal language, which is that if you are acting as a Kremlin intermediary who has been specially tasked by the Kremlin to communicate a message and also to schedule a secret summit, you are, legally speaking, an agent of the Kremlin. So let's apply that to the courtroom paradigm: George Papadopoulos, legally speaking, was acting as a special agent for the Kremlin in that situation. He informed an entire room of men working on Trump's campaign that he was a Kremlin agent for that special purpose. Their response to that was not to contact the FBI, not to fire him, not to tell him, "Don't do this," but in fact to promote him to the speechwriting team for Donald Trump's first foreign policy speech. At that point, that speech was four weeks away. Across any of the paradigms I mentioned—political partisanship, the courtroom, journalism, Hollywood—that's collusion.

PLAYBOY: Especially the Hollywood one. Suave, bronzed Papadopoulos, with his instagrammability, his reality-TV aspirations, so eager to make himself useful——

ABRAMSON: I truly didn't pick that example because I thought it was the best. It just came to mind.

PLAYBOY: But seriously, what makes Papadopoulos's appearance at that national-security meeting and his self-identification as a Kremlin intermediary so important that you mentioned it first?

ABRAMSON: Papadopoulos's role in the Trump-Russia story is primarily that of a canary in the coal mine. He is constantly saying things to people connected to Trump and, in some cases, to Trump himself that should immediately cause those people—if they are acting in accordance with the law, American values and our democratic processes—to tell him to stop or to amend their own behavior immediately. But they don't.

In polite society the presumption of innocence is an option, not a mandate.

I'll give another example. On April 26, 2016, Joseph Mifsud tells Papadopoulos that the Kremlin has stolen Hillary Clinton's e-mails. According to Trump aide John Mashburn, who testified before Congress, Papadopoulos did, in fact, communicate that information to the campaign. Well, great. The moment he communicates that information, it should have been clear to everyone in the Trump campaign, from Donald Trump all the way down, that if there's one thing you now cannot legally do under any circumstances it's take any action to try to acquire Hillary Clinton's e-mails, because you've been told that they were stolen. So now you know that cybercrimes are being committed against the United States. You know that any such materials are stolen property. You know that they have value, which is why the Kremlin stole them. If you solicit them or take them, that's an illegal campaign donation from a foreign national—a thing of in-kind value.

What happens is the moment Papadopoulos communicates that information to the Trump campaign, it sets off a firestorm of activity, from top to bottom, trying to *get* that stolen material. Papadopoulos didn't steal any material, and while he perhaps should have registered as a foreign agent, his decision to communicate what someone had told him to someone else is not a crime. But it should have smacked the conscience and sense of legal responsibility of everyone on the Trump campaign. They should have changed their behavior from that moment onward. In fact, I believe it did nothing but excite their desire to act in a criminal fashion as much as possible throughout the entire summer of 2016.

PLAYBOY: It's amazing when Trumpworld's desire to go crime'ing gets excited. It's like the jealous girlfriend meme: Paul Manafort walking hand in hand with crimes and ogling——

ABRAMSON: [*Laughs*] More crimes.

PLAYBOY: Okay, but the other thing about Papadopoulos that's relevant for the Mueller probe is that his yapping likely is what set off the FBI. The right has tried to say that it was suspicions about Carter Page, or the appearance of the Steele dossier, that initiated the FBI investigation. And it has tried and failed to frame those things, and thus the investigation into Trump's Russia ties itself, as unlawful and partisan. But as far as I know, the first cue to American intelligence services was the word from the Australian diplomat dude Papadopoulos spilled secrets to one night, reportedly when he'd had too much to drink. Is that right?

ABRAMSON: Alexander Downer.

PLAYBOY: Okay. You're damn good with the names.

ABRAMSON: I would say this: The question of how the counterintelligence investigation into five members of Trump's campaign was initiated is entirely immaterial.

PLAYBOY: What?

ABRAMSON: If I told you that, instead of a missive from Australian diplomat Alexander Downer, it was a candygram from someone wearing a bunny suit who

showed up at the FBI office, said "Look into George Papadopoulos" and then vanished in a puff of smoke, would I care if the FBI then started asking questions to see whether there was something they needed to investigate? I wouldn't, unless they violated someone's constitutional rights with, say, a warrant that had no reasonable suspicion or probable cause behind it or an investigative stop with no reasonable suspicion behind it. But what excites the suspicion of a federal agent in this situation is really only relevant to the right, because they have a Rube Goldberg–like theory of a federal conspiracy that works only if the feds had some other hidden motive for initiating this investigation. Since we have no evidence of that, the question of how the investigation began is, at best, a legal question that would be handled at some future trial through a motion in limine [a pre-trial motion to exclude testimony or evidence].

A much more important question is how, when Papadopoulos ends up on the speech-editing team for Trump's first foreign policy address, the speech he's editing has effectively, as I see it, been written by a lobbyist for the Kremlin-controlled gas company Gazprom and Dimitri Simes, president and chief executive officer of the Center for the National Interest, who has been described as friendly with Vladimir Putin. I believe that is another instance of, on its face, collusion. You do not have your foreign policy secretly written and edited by Kremlin agents and then represent your foreign policy as merely the product of your own American values and belief in the best interest of America when you know that what you expressed were the Kremlin's values and the Kremlin's agenda. That is prima facie collusion in the broad sense of that term. Yet we focus on Alexander Downer, which is the sort of "look at the monkey" trick someone might pull to keep you from focusing on what's important. Even if Downer had never existed or Papadopoulos had never relayed any information to him—if, in fact, he had made up out of whole cloth this revelation from Papadopoulos—we already know that at least five allied intelligence agencies communicated to the U.S. around the same time that there were suspicious contacts between Trump aides and associates speaking to Kremlin agents.

PLAYBOY: But grant me that Papadopoulos supposedly blathering about collusion while drunk is cinematic—everyone's favorite "coffee boy." All right, give me another data point that you find persuasive in the case for collusion.

ABRAMSON: Let's stick with that four-week period. We don't just have the March 31 meeting and the fact that Papadopoulos contributed to the first foreign policy speech at the Mayflower Hotel on April 27, 2016. Let's stick with the same sort of fact pattern and find a third instance of collusion. According to J.D. Gordon, who was the number two man on Trump's National Security Advisory Committee, the Republican National Committee platform on the subject of Ukraine was changed in a way that would benefit the Kremlin when the convention came around in July 2016. Gordon told the Republican delegates with whom he was arguing about the platform that he was on the phone with Trump Tower, speaking with Donald Trump directly.

Lately people call me a very old-timey word I never thought I'd hear this much: grifter.

They then changed the platform in a way that would benefit the Kremlin. Gordon immediately begins lying and saying that he had no role whatsoever. Paul Manafort says the same. Donald Trump says, "I had no role in that. I was not involved," even as alleged Kremlin spy Konstantin Kilimnik is running around Europe—and we know he's a former associate of Paul Manafort's—saying he made this change happen through his secret contacts with the Trump campaign.

PLAYBOY: And more recently it has come out that Manafort seems to have shared campaign data with Kilimnik, who was known as Manafort's "Russian brain."

ABRAMSON: Exactly. So we now know that there was an ongoing exchange of information and even negotiations between Paul Manafort and Konstantin Kilimnik about how much value monetarily Manafort was producing for Kilimnik and—through Kilimnik—to Oleg Deripaska, the aluminum magnate who has said, "I don't separate myself from the state." Deripaska does not see any daylight between himself and Vladimir Putin, so why should we?

PLAYBOY: Okay, we already have plenty of grassy knolls and book depositories to talk about, but I'd say the Trump Tower meeting between Trump Jr., Jared Kushner, Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya and others, in June 2016, is maybe chief among them. Have I missed anything between April and——

ABRAMSON: Oh yes. Because by the time we even get to March 31, 2016, I count the number of acts of collusion for which Trump and the Trump campaign are responsible as in the double digits.

Let's be very clear that throughout the presidential campaign, from the moment Donald Trump announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015, he was negotiating two multibillion-dollar Trump Tower Moscow deals—not just with Kremlin agents but directly with the Kremlin itself. That would be the Trump-Agalarov deal and the Trump-Rozov deal. Multi*billion* dollar. Trump was hiding this deal even from top executives in the Trump Organization. He lied about it to American voters by saying he had no association at all with the Kremlin or with Russian nationals. In so doing, in lying to Trump Organization executives, in lying to the voters, he was, every single time he lied—which was virtually daily—creating blackmail material for the Kremlin.

This also creates the possibility of Trump's being charged with bribery if he was considering his businesses first when creating Russia policy. Those are not just acts of collusion as to each of those Trump Tower deals—the 2013 Trump-Agalarov deal [which Trump was in Moscow negotiating during the period described in the Steele dossier] and the 2015 Trump-Rozov deal; those are entire courses of conduct that take months to unfold and have numerous sub-events within them that are collusion.

PLAYBOY: All this reporting and your analysis are both alarming and cut-and-dried. If you're just synthesizing known material, why do people keep saying you're rushing to judgment, running roughshod over due process?

ABRAMSON: Well, a few things. First, a lot of people misunderstand that the presumption of innocence is, in the law, what's called a "trial presumption," meaning it applies only for the jurors sitting in an actual criminal case. In polite society the presumption of innocence is an option, not a mandate. Number two, our standard for when and whether we apply the presumption of innocence doesn't have to be beyond a reasonable doubt. Let me give you an example: Donald Trump, according to *The Washington Post,* lies on average 11 times a day. That means he would never be treated as a credible witness in any courtroom. It means he can't be used as a source by reporters under basic journalistic principles. It also means that in our conventional politics, no one, as a partisan, should support any politician who lies 11 times every day. I would even say that if you take another paradigm I was talking about, the Hollywood paradigm, anyone who lies 11 times a day would be a terribly written character in a movie.

PLAYBOY: Yes.

ABRAMSON: I've decided I'm not going to credit any of Donald Trump's words whatsoever unless they are "a statement against interest," which in the law is considered to have a special quality of reliability because the statement doesn't serve the speaker's interests. I never quoted a defense attorney for the truth of a matter unless it was—and, frankly, Trump's attorneys do this with stunning regularity—a statement against interest that never should have been made and therefore has indicia of reliability because it is a deviation from professional responsibility, something made as an excited utterance.

PLAYBOY: Reading you and talking to you, I come away with the conclusion that, yes, you're left-brained gonzo, but you're also exceptionally earnest and prudent. It's hard to reconcile this image of you with the one your detractors have—that you're a crazy conspiracy theorist, an Alex Jones of the left.

ABRAMSON: Lately people call me a very old-timey word I never thought I'd hear this much: *grifter.* That is the ultimate way of saying I'm a deductive thinker—and as an academic, that upsets me more than anything else. I've made my life about building an inductive communication practice.

PLAYBOY: Once your critics can't prove a writer like you is a paid operative for George Soros or the Kremlin——

ABRAMSON: [*Laughs*]

PLAYBOY: I guess that is confusing. Why would anyone want to tell the truth about our times on Twitter? The cynical view is there can be no motivation for truth-telling and repping "resistance" unless it's to pick up some DNC swag or some speaking gigs.

ABRAMSON: That's exactly it. There are so many easier ways for someone with my educational and professional background to make money—many of which I was pursuing well before Donald Trump—than to go online and tweet 45,000 times for free. The idea that anyone gets on Twitter thinking, Well, this will lead to a book deal, is just—no one's that crazy. But even separate from that, I think there's a reason #resistance is used as a slur. If you google my name and "resistance," almost every single article that comes up is a hit piece. The reason is that "resistance" also presumes a sort of deductive thinking, that you knew what the end result was going to be and then you figured out how to get there. You decided, "I am part of the #resistance; now how do I find my niche within that?" In fact, what the people writing those hit pieces don't want to acknowledge is that someone like me or like Walter Shaub—former director of the Office of Government Ethics—got into this because of our values, which are something you build inductively, not because Donald Trump is president and not because there's some movement you want to be part of. Donald Trump doesn't determine my persona or my values.

The Washington Post is counting up his lies. They should be doing the opposite.

PLAYBOY: You and I, though we share a suspicion of Trump, are not naturally fellow travelers. If this were the summer of 2016, we might not have seen eye to eye, because I supported Hillary Clinton and you supported Bernie Sanders. We've even mixed it up online about Tad Devine, Bernie's chief strategist and a running buddy of Paul Manafort. Things sometimes get testy on that score, but mostly we—and I think most Americans—are aligned in wanting some explanation of why, after the election, most of us felt, This isn't America. And the truth is it wasn't America. You have pointed out it was likely Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey putting torque on the people who hold power. Some might say we have a Russian asset in the White House.

ABRAMSON: Well, as you indicate, all it took to be a critic of Donald Trump was to have some sense of America's core values as ingrained in our rule of law and in our democratic processes.

PLAYBOY: And maybe a passing interest in the Constitution.

ABRAMSON: Right. And therefore you can have people with incredibly heterogeneous backgrounds who find themselves in a position of offering a type of small-*r* "resistance" through their writing.

PLAYBOY: Now let's talk about your work before all this. As a conceptual poet, your work seems to have been to afflict the comfortable, even destabilize our ideas of what counts as fiction and what counts as fact. But your purpose as a journalist seems to be the opposite: to lay down the facts, to comfort the afflicted.

ABRAMSON: Well, I can tell you I afflicted the comfortable so much as a poet that I got myself thrown out of the American poetry community. I have a background of being, maybe inadvertently, an affliction—in a way that is distressing to many.

PLAYBOY: Do poets think your writing is paranoid or "Russophobic" or whatever?

ABRAMSON: Oh no. Their objection was to my poetry, not to my journalism.

PLAYBOY: That's kind of hilarious. I have to hear the story of you as a poetry-world

affliction—like that Ultimate Fighting Championship logo. I mean, it's obvious something is going on with your work on Twitter that excites all kinds of violent reactions. A magazine I respect once told readers not to read or retweet you. What? Nobody has ever told me not to read Tucker Carlson or *Mein Kampf*. Can I tell you the truth? For a while, before you had a Simon & Schuster contract, I worried that you wouldn't be able to publish a word in the mainstream media because you had been tagged as a conspiracy nutter. So let's talk about being hated, both in the poetry world and as a journalist.

ABRAMSON: I think I tend to involve myself—and have for many years, well before Donald Trump—in projects that create pretty spectacular threat matrices for a lot of people. That's not why I do what I do, at all. I wish it were otherwise.

PLAYBOY: You make trouble.

ABRAMSON: Yes, and my wife and friends have noticed that trend. So when people react to me in that way—partly for that reason and partly because they almost never actually dissect anything I've said in any detail, and if they do, not in a way that's at all serious—I tend to think that the threat I'm posing is not a threat to truth or knowledge or responsible discourse but one of these other data points in the matrix of threats that any highly fraught situation can create.

PLAYBOY: In these times in particular, your professional failings can suddenly have existential consequences and could get you labeled "Vichy," or a collaborationist. That can be terrifying.

ABRAMSON: One of the things that give a certain sort of existential as well as intellectual and emotional comfort about being process-oriented is that if you execute the process to the best of your ability, it doesn't guarantee the right result, but it can guarantee peace of mind. So I never go to bed in a cold sweat about whether I might be wrong—not because I don't think it's possible that I could be wrong, but because I know that when I write on Twitter I'm bringing to bear my expertise as an attorney, as someone who has worked as a criminal investigator, to the best of my ability. If the worst-case scenario is that I'm wrong, that isn't going to concern me, because I'm invested mostly in process. But also because what great news it would be for the country if I'm wrong.

Now, how does that play into people who are full-time journalists working at corporate media institutions who are unhappy with what I'm doing? They see me engaging in a different type of process and in a different venue than they're accustomed to, and therefore they see it as a threat to their process. But if you've worked in the criminal justice system as I have for a number of years, that is the perfect locus for many different, and in many respects contradictory, processes to be performed at once: The processes that law enforcement brings to bear are very different from those of a prosecutor, which are very different again from those of a probation officer, a judge, a defense attorney—and yet they are all in the same room, and they all believe that ultimately a just result will, more often than not, be reached. Granted, it's often not reached, but it is reached enough that we can remain hopeful that the process, as we continue to perfect it, will lead to more and more justice over time.

PLAYBOY: It's impressive that you don't get brittle and defensive on Twitter. You hardly go a day without sticking to your subject, and you've carved out a lane for yourself: the Seth Abramson lane. A few times I've felt that you were trying for other Twitter styles, like quips, but I could almost see your discomfort. You want to go back to your patented long-thread process, which builds on itself and corrects itself as it goes. You usually acknowledge when you've made so much as a spelling mistake.

ABRAMSON: Yes.

PLAYBOY: I see you're having a little trouble with "Kilimnik," by the way.

ABRAMSON: Yes, but did you see that I issued a correction and noted that I had misspelled it as "Kilimnick"? All that happens in the open. One of the things I'm doing is letting readers see my process. One of the few positive effects of the digital age is that we're better able to handle contradictory and ephemeral information that we know might be fixed down the line. We're able to better deal with temporary cognitive dissonance and say, "Look, these two things are in conflict and I know one of them has to be wrong. I'll just remember each of them and hold them in my head, knowing that one is ultimately not going to be true." The conventional journalistic process says no one can watch me at work. But I don't mind having people see me at work, and I don't mind being wrong, because I think my readers understand I'm doing the best I can. I will admit when I'm wrong.

PLAYBOY: That sounds pretty normal and sane, but what's this about being a "curatorial journalist" or, worse yet, a "metajournalist"? I'm going to tell you right now: The old newspapermen who still get the scoops don't like that fancy academic jive.

ABRAMSON: Yes, I know what they say: "Someone who's a curatorial journalist or a metajournalist gets the benefit of a hard-news reporter's work without doing the work." That sort of intraprofessional tension is very common. Prosecutors don't fully understand the work that defense attorneys do and vice versa. Still, I think it's easy for a conventional, hard-news reporter to presume that what I do is easy. But if it were so easy for reporters to fully immerse themselves in all the reporting that has been done on a subject before they write, they'd all be, like me, reading Greek media, Lebanese media, Qatari media, British media. They're not doing that, because they also have things I don't have: deadlines and pressure to get stories out at a certain clip. I have to read much, much more than your average reporter because I have to survey the whole field. I will never say that a hard-news reporter's job is easy, and I wish they wouldn't say what I do is easy.

But many people understand how to do this curatorial work. It's about disposition. We live in a time when video gamers are being used to solve medical mysteries, and the reason a large number of them are so good at solving mysteries that even experts can't solve is because they're comfortable with failure. The very definition of being a video gamer is to take a risk, find out it's a mistake, fail, die and then try again. Increasingly with services like Twitch, you're doing all those things in public, and you're willing to have people see you fail. We've gotten to the point where there's even considered to be a certain beauty in failing spectacularly. In the digital age we must handle an excess of information, and we better learn how to handle it and allow for failure and false leads. That's how we're going to figure out how to survive.

PLAYBOY: But there's also a certain intolerance of mistakes.

ABRAMSON: Okay, so this is why I'm no longer a working poet. I wrote a poem that was perceived to be a mistake. It's actually a broader conversation in poetry right now, about the openness of contemporary poetry to mistakes, failure and recovery.

PLAYBOY: Was it seen as racist, like you wrote in Ebonics or you——

ABRAMSON: No.

PLAYBOY: I'm dying to know.

ABRAMSON: I'm a literary remixer. I had a theory that there is certain language in the public sphere that's incredibly destructive. A young man who had killed some people had written a manifesto, and I decided to take all the words—and *only* the words—in his manifesto and remix them into a statement of love and peace directed against his act of hatred.

Donald Trump is the living embodiment of the internet. As a result, if he commits a criminal conspiracy, it's like the internet: Everything is too public and too available.

PLAYBOY: Was this the incel figure in California, Elliot Rodger?

ABRAMSON: This was the incel figure in California, yes. And a couple of things happened. Number one, a lot of people mistakenly thought the poem was written in his voice. It was not. It was actually an address to him. But a lot of people also said, understandably, that this language is so dangerous and so charged that even using it as material to create something completely different—even something intended to combat the hatred of his words—invests each of those words with a sort of power and utility when, in fact, we want to turn away from them altogether.

I'm a metamodernist. I believe either we can find a way to use language to empower ourselves to fight what we hate in that language or we can say that we're going to turn away. But we can't turn away; that's just letting the language continue to damage us. But I'm no longer a poet, because I wrote that poem.

PLAYBOY: Hold on: "meta*modernist*"?

ABRAMSON: Yes. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, a University of Oregon professor, coined that term in 1975. He believed that the public sphere needed a way of thinking that was more pragmatically useful than postmodernism for actual activist ends. Postmodernism is a useful sort of private paradigm through which to emotionally and intellectually react to phenomena. But in the public sphere you need something more "between and beyond"—more meta—to achieve your very specific real-world ends.

A good example of metamodernism is the early stand-up comedy of Sarah Silverman: this sort of "I'm just a little girl" routine, but using it to undercut misogyny in a really smart way. That would be considered sort of metamodernist. Oh, and do you remember the *Saturday Night Live* sketch of Kate McKinnon singing "Hallelujah" right after Hillary Clinton lost and Leonard Cohen died? That was a very metamodern moment because you don't know how to process it. What was the tone behind that? What was the intention? Her position was very hard to pin down, but that made it impossible to look away from, and it was carrying such an emotional freight that even if you didn't understand why it moved you or whether you should be laughing or if it was in bad taste—at least for me, it made me feel better.

So my poem was literally written with all this in mind, but many people felt it was a game in my head and that publishing it was destructive: You're being insensitive to the feelings of others. If someone says, "This is really harmful,"

you can't say, "No, it's not." I mean, it is or it isn't, and that's something someone else gets to decide. Quite fairly so.

PLAYBOY: Back to Kate McKinnon. When she performed "Hallelujah" that night, Breitbart jumped on it and tweeted, "We did it, fam. We broke them." And that seemed so sadistic to me that now I tweet that line and tag Breitbart whenever the right is having its time in the barrel, to use a Roger Stone meme.

ABRAMSON: Ah—meme drift! When the language becomes severed from the image in the first few stages, but eventually the language *and* the image change. You know, I wonder sometimes whether I have become a meme, because I will see people on Twitter say to someone writing too much on any subject, "Don't go all Seth Abramson on this." But the funniest part for me is that there will always be one or two people who say, "Who the fuck is Seth Abramson?" So it's a meme fail, right?

PLAYBOY: The other meme around you is when people put "1/3,218" at the end of a tweet, to suggest they're going to be threading for days.

ABRAMSON: That drives me up a wall, because you can't thread that way. You thread not knowing how long the thread is going to be; that's the whole point. People will say, "Seth Abramson, one out of 2 million," and I wish it were that easy. I wish I knew that this was going to end at 2 million.

PLAYBOY: Okay, so you're accused of writing too long and of being a grifter. But people also say you're a fraud—and *fraud* is such a watchword of our time. We have a conspiracy to defraud the United States, in the words of Robert Mueller. Trump has been called a fraud with Trump University and the Trump Foundation.

ABRAMSON: I had a journalist with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ask me, more than once, "Do you think you're like Donald Trump in any way?" And while I understood him asking the question because the context of the article was about me developing a following on Twitter, what I really wanted to say was I think Donald Trump got elected because our fraud sensors are really bad right now. If you're reading my discourse on who I am and how I came to write what I write as some sort of elaborate fraud while, in this country, just enough people were completely blind to the obvious career-long and lifelong fraud that Donald Trump is, that suggests there's a problem.

PLAYBOY: As an attorney, can you tell me if there has ever been anyone else so consistent in lying and who says so often the diametric opposite of the truth—like "No puppet, no puppet, you're the puppet"?

ABRAMSON: Trump is revealing the truth through the lies, effectively. I've represented thousands of criminal defendants but never a single person who lies even 10 percent as much as Trump does—and I'm including people charged with financial crimes, armed robbery, you name it—which says to me that he is pathological as a liar. But it is systemic, like any pathology, and therefore it gives you an opportunity to recognize the system and either work around it or somehow repurpose it in a way that is generative. What I've said to people is that they should understand any Donald Trump sentiment as being fundamentally a lie, and their goal should be to figure out if there's any truth anywhere in what he says, rather than looking for the lies. *The Washington Post* is counting up his lies. They should be doing the opposite: "How many truths can we find?"

PLAYBOY: And in addition to the lies, he has boasted of things that are at the core of the potential crimes Mueller is investigating, like "Russia, if you're listening" and "I love WikiLeaks." I'm convinced we can get a confession out of him, but the way to do it would be to say, "You're right; there's no collusion. It's much bigger than collusion. It's much more *interesting* than collusion. You've done something no American president has ever done——"

ABRAMSON: My wife has made the point a million times that what reporters should do is simply use what they know happened and turn it into praise. They should say to Trump, "You were smart enough to see that our interests are aligned with Russia's interests more than any previous president ever had—in fact, none of them realized it at all. You realized it and so you said, 'Hey, if I can put us in a place where we're going to have peace with Russia, where we're both going to benefit, why shouldn't I?' Moreover, you're a businessman who became a politician. You shouldn't have to give up making money. That's why we end up with so many terrible politicians: No one who has been successful wants to become a politician. You made a decision that you weren't going to give up your success and your ability to make money just because you were going to be a politician, and you realized in the bargain that it would benefit everybody. Why in the world would you ever apologize for that?"

PLAYBOY: "That's right. I'm amazing and that's tremendous."

ABRAMSON: And then he would have just confessed to something as close to treason as you're going to get without actually committing it. From a certain standpoint—and I realize now I'm going to take a dive into the theoretical—this administration is the first metamodern criminal scandal. All prior public corruption scandals had to include a conversation about how information was hidden and what we were able to access. That was where the drama was: "Can we get that 18 minutes of tape? Does it prove the case?" Donald Trump is the living embodiment of the internet. As a result, if he commits a criminal conspiracy, it's like the internet: Everything is too public and too available. It's so present to us—the criminal conspiracy—that the challenge is "Do we have the correct frame of mind and discourse about how evidence works to recognize what is already public?" It's a new type of criminal scandal the likes of which investigators have never seen before, lawyers have never seen before, journalists have never seen before, the public's never seen before. The test for us is not "Can we get to the information?" but "Do we understand what we're seeing?"

PLAYBOY: All this news-cycle poisoning has been an affront. We're already traumatized by digitization. Concerned citizens have had to put every bit of energy into reading, investigating and keeping sane and wise in a political discourse that feels like chaos, vertigo and danger.

ABRAMSON: That's true. But at the same time I hear a lot of people rising to that challenge: "I am going to educate myself on topics I never would have been interested in if we weren't in a civic emergency right now." That is a story that, oddly, I think we don't hear very often in either left-wing, centrist or right-wing journalism. We have the conversation about fake news versus real news, whereas if we had a more complex post-internet conversation about information generally, we'd see that this whole thing has actually been a success story for people's willingness to engage with information in complex ways.

And how exciting and ennobling is it for us, as a country, that so many of us are actually willing to learn new information and skills in order to make our country slowly, with many steps back along the way, a better place? ■

PLAYMATE
OF THE YEAR

JORDAN Emmauel

In less than a year, she went from Club Bunny to December Playmate to 2019 PMOY. The story of her path to Playboy royalty—told here in her own words—is as breathtaking as her beauty

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ADRIENNE RAQUEL**

American society places women in glass boxes, and from all angles people question our choices and project ideas of what we're supposed to be and how we're supposed to look. Within our boxes, we gaze at our reflections in the glass just to point out our flaws and probe our feelings of inadequacy. As a double minority—a black woman in America—I'm subjected to a different magnitude of all the above. So to have a monumental force like PLAYBOY supporting people who look like me, especially when it wasn't trendy or accepted, has been life-changing.

Upon discovering I was one of two Playboy Bunnies who had become a Playmate and then Playmate of the Year, and the first African American to reach that milestone, I felt immense pride. PLAYBOY featured the first black Playmate in March 1965, before the Voting Rights Act bestowed the right to vote on all Americans across our nation. This iconic brand, which displays the most beautifully liberated women, was letting America and the world know that black women were among that group. But America as a whole had yet to even acknowledge black people as equals. So for me to reach this accomplishment now—when, according to a 2018 NPR piece, black women are among the least desirable to date; when people continue to behave as if we are good enough to sleep with but not to go out with; that we are side chicks and not wives; that we are fetishes and not humans with feelings; that our melanin makes us less attractive—is an honor I will forever hold close to my heart, not just for myself but for all the other black girls who are left to question their beauty.

In a world where women are not permitted to make decisions for themselves without an earful of judgment, including self-inflicted and woman-on-woman bashing, PLAYBOY has provided a platform to promote not only one's liberation, but one's intelligence. I am a woman with a degree from the University of Miami in broadcast journalism, music business and art history.

I've dedicated my career to bringing life to images and converting ideas into thought-provoking video and digital content. But my intelligence was called into question when PLAYBOY revealed that I was the December 2018 Playmate and I was told by another woman that I was less intelligent because I had used my body to make money. I was taken aback. It was a response I wasn't anticipating, as I didn't see the correlation between nudity and education.

For a moment, I had forgotten about the glass container I'd been placed in, forgotten that we live in a place where women aren't allowed to be multidimensional. A woman can't be intelligent *and* attractive, a powerhouse *and* kind, intellectual *and* feminine, a mother *and* a boss, and most certainly not a sexual creature along with any of those roles. This body houses the same parts that all women share. Some of them provide sexual stimulation, but this is also the body that creates, carries and nourishes new life. What was it about my body that made it so shameful that it could suddenly erase all that I've done and have yet to do?

Experiences like this inspired me to co-found a nonprofit called Women With Voices. I knew there needed to be a space where women of all financial backgrounds, races and ages could learn from and support one another. When women get together and connect over shared experiences, we understand there's no difference between us. And that empowers us all.

I am a woman who has suffered from anxiety and depression; a woman who, through her nonprofit, is actively working for social change. I sit and ward off questions like "How is being nude empowering? How can little girls look up to you?" My answer: I empower myself and others by using Women With Voices, PLAYBOY and any other outlet to encourage people to unite, learn and follow what they know is true to their heart, because I am a woman with a voice. I am a woman who is proud of her body, her sexuality, her mind, her capacity for compassion.

And I'm a woman who can deal with the judgment as long as it serves to aid women in liberating themselves—and standing confidently outside their glass boxes.

STYLING BY RYAN YOUNG; OPENING PAGES: TRENCH COAT BY PUSHBUTTON; THIS PAGE: DRESS BY TOPSHOP, JEWELRY STYLIST'S OWN

TOP LEFT: SHOES BY ALDO; BOTTOM LEFT AND RIGHT PAGE: BRIEFS BY HUNZA G, SHOES BY ALDO, GLOVES AND JEWELRY STYLIST'S OWN

RAPPER'S DELIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RAYSCORRUPTEDMIND**

Hip-hop megastar ***Travis Scott*** *discusses the freedom and constraints that come with breaking ground in music's most powerful genre*

"Let me get that blunt." Travis Scott pokes his head out from the backseat of his silver Bentley. His security guard lights up, tests his work and then passes it to his boss. The 26-year-old Houston-born rapper's bleached braids are all we see of him as he inhales and exhales, rolling up the windows. He insists on sitting in the luxury car—the same one he turned up in with his driver at the wheel—because the Hollywood Hills midcentury modern edifice that is the site of today's PLAYBOY shoot imposes a strict no smoking policy. His entourage of 10, decked out in their leader's merchandise, never leaves the driveway, setting up a scene and an energy only a rap superstar could create.

Scott is today's most hyped hip-hop artist, following a slow and steady climb that began with an appearance on Kanye West's 2012 compilation *Cruel Summer.* His career trajectory dramatically shifted last year when *Astroworld,* his third studio album, debuted at number one on the U.S. Billboard Top 200 thanks in part to a laundry list of genre-defying features from heavyweights including Drake, Kid Cudi and James Blake. This winter, he translated his warped atmospheric soundscape into a two-leg experiential stadium tour of the same name, equipped with a Ferris wheel and splashes of color as trippy as his sparse staccato rhymes. And he has already performed at the Super Bowl.

Such a freewheeling artist, backed by a major label and with six Grammy nominations, would not exist without the rappers who came before him. Scott agrees: Sitting next to him in the hazy car is the rapper Nas, whom Scott personally selected to discuss the evolution of hip-hop. "How you came into the game, it was kind of crazy," he says to Nas.

Nasir Jones, the New York–born poet, began his music career in the early 1990s, about a decade after the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" hit the Billboard Top 40. In 1994, Nas moved the needle with his revolutionary debut album, *Illmatic,* whose deft wordplay and expertly woven beats tell a vivid tale of a young man from the inner city. At the same time, rap, on its way to becoming the top-selling music genre, was still widely dismissed as a fad, too volatile and monotonous to last.

Yet here they are, more than two decades later, sitting in this rare Bentley, two icons, from two different eras in the ever-evolving American hip-hop timeline, discussing the past, present and future of a genre that has both lifted them up and forced them to tear down the industry walls that confine them. Their hour-long conversation, presented here in edited and condensed form, begins with a discussion of the most glaring

INTRO BY **ARIELA KOZIN**

STYLING BY DOMINIQUE BISSON. VINTAGE JACKET; TURTLENECK AND BLUE VELVET PANTS BY SAINT LAURENT

differences between their debuts: the advancement of technology, the influence of social media and the power of the internet.

SCOTT: Speaking of a time before all this technology, it was like, "Okay, I rap." You had to get to this popular producer in your city. He would hear your shit, and maybe he'd let you record and give you a beat. Then he'd bring you to the DJ, and radio was the main problem. But now it's like, man, I got my own social media. I can drop my shit. I can cater to my own followers. People can look at my shit if they want to. It's not like the radio, where somebody can stop people from hearing me. I can yell it loud right now: I want to rap! If people want to catch on to it, they can catch on to it. And then, if you want to explain what's going on in your personal life, you talk to your fans too. Back then you had to do a press conference.

NAS: You can reach the world faster—a lot faster than back then. That's a great thing, because it was mind-boggling trying to figure out how to get this message out to people and market your record at the right time and then drop a single six weeks before the album. That's gone.

SCOTT: You can reach the world now.

NAS: Now you can just go, "Yo, the album will be out in a week." No single, no nothing.

SCOTT: Whatever you want——

NAS: Because of the internet. We can go do a song right now and put it up. We don't have to ask nobody. The record industry actually follows what we do, especially once you make your name in the game.

SCOTT: I'm guessing hip-hop used to be about bars and just a unique flow over beats. It was like straight soul, and man, you're telling your story; it was just bar to bar, killing it, and not really about anything being catchy. It was just really raw.

Nowadays, people might not see it that way, but it's the same thing. It's just as raw. But technology, man. We came up on iPhones, you know what I mean? We're at a point now where we don't even write our raps down. We're just going straight off the dome in the booth. I know from people I work with, like Young Thug and Quavo, most everyone likes going in and just laying down whatever's on their minds.

The past generation knocked down so many doors where, you know, they were spitting a lot of pain, man. They was dealing with a lot of police stuff. We're still dealing with that now, but it wasn't so free. Now we got more of a voice at the label. We can kind of put out our own music whenever. You and I could do a song during this interview and upload it right now if we wanted to.

NAS: That's right. Being an MC or a rapper, you got to change with the times. I can stay me, sure, but the challenge is to stay with what's going on. If you look at the great ones from back then, a lot of them have four albums; they had short careers. That's changed now. All the restrictions are gone. You can be free to make your music.

When hip-hop started out, you only had a top five. You had a short list of dope rappers, from Ice Cube to Slick Rick. You could count them on your fingers. Hip-hop is such a big thing now that everybody's jumping in on it. There are so many different styles that by the time you do the thing that you do, this dude over here done started a whole new way. You got to stay on top of what's going on just for the love of music.

You said it was once about writing down the pain and all of that. Nowadays the pain has changed. We're after different things. We broke past the barriers. We understand what we need to do and we're in control of what we're doing, and no one can stop it now. No one can tell us what to do, what we can't do. Rap music can't be stopped now.

SCOTT: I got a whole other line of respect for how you came into the game. Me, personally, when I was coming into it, I was never into rap-rap. I had to learn to like it, because I didn't understand it.

I'm from Houston, so listening to East Coast rap and West Coast rap is a little different from the South. It's a different type of tempo, a different type of tone. So when I heard it, it just sounded foreign. But the *swag,* you know what I mean? The way you carried yourself. Just growing up listening and dialing into your albums, you hear the art of telling a story. I feel like I was a kid who was just by myself, alone in my mind all the time. I always had this, like, deep, just floating consciousness.

One of my idols is Kid Cudi and the way he tells his stories about how he felt as a kid growing up, like where he's from. I related to that. I adopted my own form of storytelling—whether it's through melodies or through raps or both. And as a producer too, just studying other fire producers—Pete Rock, Kanye, Pharrell—I was always into mixing different genres. I wasn't stuck solely in one field.

I like to bridge the gap between different styles of music. I always made my own beats and shit. I love James Blake, Toro y Moi and Björk. These types of people influenced me on another level. That's what's moved me. I mean, that's the type of picture I want to paint.

When I was old enough to understand what you were spitting, it was just like, Oh, shit. Now that I know music, I can see how you came into the game. Like, man, I was online watching when you came out at a show, and you spit that verse. I forget——

FAUX FUR COAT BY BALENCIAGA; VINTAGE WHITE BUTTON-DOWN; VINTAGE PINK FLOYD T-SHIRT FROM FOR ALL TO ENJOY; JEWELRY SCOTT'S OWN

"I'm an expressive artist, but with media and shit, it gets misconstrued."

NAS: "Live at the Barbeque"?
SCOTT: "Live at the Barbeque," yeah. When I saw that video, man, I felt like I was in the crowd. You know what I'm saying? I was like, "Yo, this nigga right here is fuckin' crazy." It kind of relates back to me when I was doing *Astroworld*. I want people to experience what it was like to listen to the *album*. Now, you sometimes lose the experience. Everything's digital, so you don't get the honor of going to the record store to get a record or a CD. You download it or stream it, and then that's it.

You pulled up. You had an idea. You was figuring it out, man. Like it just took over my whole mind-set, though. I've been working toward, as an artist, just bringing back the experience. For my first album, *Rodeo,* I made an action figure——
NAS: When I first saw you coming up with the action figure, I was like, "Damn, I wish I could have thought of that." And then I just heard your music, and I said, "This dude is coming." You was doing something I wish I did when I was in my 20s, which was not giving the camera much. If you go back to one of the interviews I did on *Video Music Box,* I don't look at the camera that much. Through the years, I would do award shows or whatever, and then I would skip the red carpet. The record label would be mad at me, that I'm up here and I'm selling all these units and I won't even walk the carpet. When you cover your face so you don't look down, I think, Damn, I wish....

I live vicariously through you when you do that, bro, because I feel you on that. You here to do the music and leave your stain on this world. Whether you be in front of them cameras or not, you don't even care.
SCOTT: I don't care. That's my whole shit, bro. It's about the music. I just express what a kid my age is going through in a time.

Being from Houston, a lot of my music is just talking about what I experienced growing up in my neighborhood, in my town. You just try to make moves and inspire people to go out and help others, to be a better person. Like, "Yo, let's be on this. Let's try to get on this type of wave."

I wouldn't say I don't feel compelled to speak on political issues; sometimes you just don't want to speak too much on stuff you don't know much about. It's not like I'm not thinking about what's going on in the world. I'm an expressive artist, but with media and shit, it gets misconstrued. As I'm sitting with you right now, I'm still figuring this out, you know?
NAS: Politics definitely affects the way I think, but the way I write is my day-to-day life. I did a song talking about daughters, because I have a daughter. "Daughters" was nominated for a Grammy. I feel it—that's why I wrote it—but I had no idea it would be acknowledged like that when it came out. So I write about day-to-day stuff, and I don't plan to write anything political, because then it's forced. It ain't a natural expression.
SCOTT: Yeah.
NAS: One thing we can't allow politics to do is take over our mind and make us fall into their game. What's going on in the news could consume our lives. If that happens, life doesn't go on. We need to continue going on.

Ray Charles and Billie Holiday and all of those great acts were entertaining and going through worse times than now. They were inspiring us. When Michael Jackson did *Thriller,* that was during Reaganomics. He gave us something to look at other than the politics, the propaganda, the lies. He gave us inspiration. And Whitney Houston, she came out and did songs that rocked us and inspired kids to want to sing and be great. The politicians want our full attention. They're hustling. I'm not getting caught up in that. I make music about life, and life comes before politics.
SCOTT: You can never predict who's going to be the voice.
NAS: As long as you got hoods, there's going to be——
SCOTT: A voice.
NAS: Those hoods are always going to yell out and say what's going on. It's going to get more fly and futuristic. But the message is always: We want food, shelter, health care and all the things we're deprived of. We want no police brutality. We want all these things. That's what hip-hop is talking about. I'm using this to get by. I'm drinking this to get by. I'm smoking this to get by. I'm selling this to get by. All those things are the ingredients for this rap thing, and that's never going to stop.

We're sitting here in a fly-ass car and this is all we dreamed about—all our brothers coming up and having something out of this life, not just material things but having whatever you want, seeing the fruits of your labor. A lot of artists never get the chance to see that.
SCOTT: We can do so much with our voices. We can go so crazy. Back then, man, I swear you can listen to a lot of albums and it was all making beats on one programmer, you know what I mean? It was only a couple of machines at the time. It's so crazy now. The technology is a new wave. It's so dynamic.

VINTAGE WHITE PANTS; JEWELRY AND REEBOK SHOES SCOTT'S OWN

LEFT: VINTAGE WHITE SUIT; JEWELRY AND REEBOK SHOES SCOTT'S OWN; RIGHT: VINTAGE PINK FLOYD T-SHIRT FROM FOR ALL TO ENVY; VINTAGE WHITE PANTS; JEWELRY AND REEBOK SHOES SCOTT'S OWN

I collaborate with different artists like John Mayer and James Blake just for vocal compatibility, because we can stretch our vocals into the next level, and with the way we record now we can do so much. The programmer only lets us do so much. We got to put it on a disc, you know what I mean?

NAS: The hip-hop game is about staying and sustaining and keeping it going. You're a great rapper, but they can't just put you in a rapper box, because your music is going in so many different directions. You're a rock star, and it always was like that. It comes from the hood. It comes from the mud and then it blows up, and then who's going to hang around? Who's going to be the one that sticks around and keeps giving us that excitement? That's what makes you great, when you can maintain in this game.

SCOTT: When I started, I never thought I could do arenas and be so big that so many people would come listen to the music and know the words. I think what makes a great artist is just the people you touch. Are they moving to your music? Are they living their life to it? Are they rocking with it or feeling inspired by it, or is it helping them get through something?

NAS: This shit is a blood sport. This shit ain't easy. This is one of the hardest games ever. I love it right now because it's testing you. What are you made of? Can you survive? What do you have to offer in 2019? Because the moment you sleep, the moment you blink your eyes too long, your spot is taken. And that's the excitement of it.

SCOTT: There's no barrier. There's just so much of a flow of things that we're trying to—we're gettin' it out, and we're expressing it in a different way: what's happening during our time in life, what's happening in the streets. We just expressing it in a different way. ■

love

in many pieces

ONE IN FIVE SINGLE AMERICANS HAS DABBLED IN NONMONOGAMY. MANY MORE HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT IT. WHY IS THE OPEN RELATIONSHIP SUDDENLY SO HOT? **ARIANNE COHEN** DISSECTS THE SEXUAL CRAZE EVERYONE IS WHISPERING ABOUT

Last year, Dani and Robert, both age 33, split after 14 years together. To many, they appeared to be typical high school sweethearts who had grown apart. This was not the case. For some time Dani had felt attracted to women. She began to crave new sexual experiences. So five years ago, Dani and Robert opened up their marriage.

First came brief stints on dating apps, which were quickly abandoned for the decidedly less turbid milieu of their friends group. Dani dated an acquaintance; they swung with another couple; that foursome eventually became a triad. And then a mutual friend rented the spare bedroom in their house. When he overstayed and began a fling with Dani, Robert wasn't happy with the situation.

"I thought it was jealousy, that he didn't trust men," Dani tells me. "I was more and more liking the philosophy of polyamory and feeling polyamorous, and it was not working for me to have this blanket limitation."

Dani eventually moved out.

I first heard about their split through office gossip. Dani's desk sits near mine at the Portland, Oregon co-working space we both frequent. We chatted benignly about her breakup one day over lunch; the way she told it, I assumed hers to be your standard monogamous marriage heading for divorce. There was no indication she and her husband had been polyamorous: engaging consensually in multiple romantic relationships. I learned that detail months later via—you guessed it—office gossip.

The thing you should know about me is that I've edited hundreds of *New York* magazine's "Sex Diaries," a series of weekly logs detailing people's sex lives in which extramarital partners routinely pop up. I've written widely on relationships, cavorted within Manhattan's sex-positive, poly and porn scenes, and have been in both monogamous and nonmonogamous relationships. So I may qualify as one of the world's superior lunchtime gab partners on the topic.

But Dani didn't openly advertise her nonmonogamy to her co-workers, her neighbors or me. And neither do I. If you haven't bedded or googled me, you wouldn't know my relationship history. This, in a nutshell, summarizes the state of open relationships in 2019. Utterly prevalent. Vehemently unadvertised.

• • •

According to a 2016 survey published in the *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy,* one in five single American adults has been in a nonmonogamous relationship. Approximately five percent of people in relationships are consensually nonmonogamous at any time, excluding the additional percentage that is cheating. This means at least one person you know—a co-worker, friend or relative—has fucked multiple humans while in a relationship and with their partner's permission. In many queer circles, consensual nonmonogamy has become so standard it may be discussed before dating or even meeting, in the form of disclaimers on online dating profiles.

Despite the one-in-five statistic, media and mainstream culture have watered down consensual nonmonogamy, commonly portraying it as an accidental threesome and minimizing how nuanced these arrangements actually are. One popular instance operates under the X Mile Rule: "Sweetie, it's okay if you hook up on the road, but don't bring it home." Even more prominent (based on my experience) is the Monogamy Except...Rule: "Honey, you can occasionally go to that bathhouse (or dominatrix or BDSM club), but otherwise we are monogamous." The most specific form of nonmonogamy may be practiced by asexuals—comprising as much as one percent of the population—who partake so their sexual partners' desires can be fulfilled.

You can be "monogamish" (mostly monogamous with occasional

excursions), "hierarchical" (maintaining primary and secondary partners) or "polyfidelitous" (faithful to more than one partner). Some lifestyles coalesce around shared responsibilities of the household, kids or caretaking; others around sex. But despite or because of nonmonogamy's current hotness—in the pages of this magazine, Ezra Miller announced he's polyamorous, and Scarlett Johansson proclaimed, "I don't think it's natural to be a monogamous person"—the lifestyle has been reduced to something kinky, easily attainable or unstructured.

Lital Pascar, a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University, researches media representations of nonmonogamy. "The media is hypnotized by polyamory," she tells me. "It's interesting how everyone is trying to sell you the same story: attractive white heterosexual couples, or even families, practicing polyamory as some naughty thing done on the side. In reality, it's ethical, and partners are respectful of one another."

Pascar points to an episode of Netflix's *Easy* in which Orlando Bloom and Malin Akerman, playing a couple trying to spice things up, pursue a threesome. "It's just a tool to make this couple more couple-y than ever," she says. In other words, *Easy* makes nonmonogamy look palatable because it's presented as being just like monogamy but with better sex.

Polyamory has similarly popped up as a plot device on *House of Cards, Transparent, I Love Dick* and *The Magicians. Insecure* and *She's Gotta Have It* explore polyamory from black perspectives. TLC's reality show *Say Yes to the Dress* recently featured a triad, and some argue that *The Bachelor*'s success is based on a subconscious embrace of open relationships. There are at least a dozen podcasts devoted to the topic. In 2015, poly-dating app Feeld, originally called 3nder, launched in the United States; a year later, OkCupid added an "Open to Non-Monogamy" option. (Tinder and Bumble, the leading heterosexual dating apps,

Internet groups led to "coherent identities and more shared understandings of how to do open nonmonogamy."

have yet to jump onboard.) In 2017, *The New York Times Magazine* asked, "Is an Open Marriage a Happier Marriage?" and in December 2018, *Quartz* ran an article longer than this one headlined POLYAMOROUS SEX IS THE MOST QUIETLY REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL WEAPON IN THE UNITED STATES.

It's not—but a possible explanation for the extravagant headline may be that polyamory requires rigorous conversations about consent. As we know, consent is reshaping our legal, media and social landscapes. Previously, states legislated certain sex acts, relationships and marriages; before that, religious codes or childbearing needs sanctioned them. Today our laws protect sex as something practiced between consenting adults. #MeToo has expanded the notion of consent into enthusiastic consent—the idea that a partner should not only agree but be thrilled about it.

This is all to say that today's culture is enamored with conversations about consent and relationships, and polyamory involves both. Thus polyamory has become increasingly visible—but not necessarily in a comprehensive way. What we're seeing is just part of the story.

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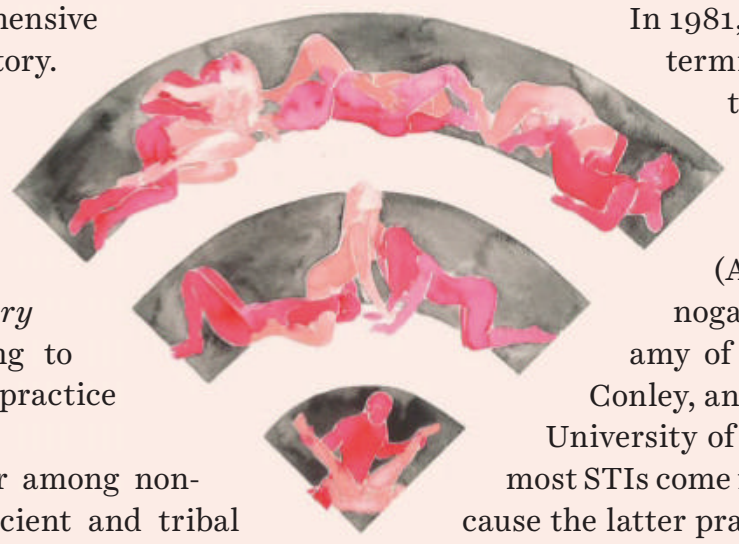
To understand why as a culture we're so curious about open relationships, you need to know how we got here. The history of nonmonogamy is exceedingly checkered. Though the word *polyamory* originated only 27 years ago according to *Merriam-Webster,* we can safely date the practice to at least the 1800s.



The 2010 book *Sex at Dawn,* popular among nonmonogamists, includes examples of ancient and tribal nonmonogamy, but that history doesn't sit well with many anthropologists who argue that some of those scenarios were less than consensual, particularly for women, and dovetailed with practices such as pedophilia. In the Victorian era, nonmonogamy popped up among groups resisting religion or the state. Mormonism was founded in 1830, and free-love groups, including upstate New York's Oneida Community, which practiced communalism, prospered in the mid-1800s. Outside of Mormonism, though, none reached the popular consciousness as anything beyond scandal and oddity.

Around the same time, Western culture began to associate nonmonogamy with racial stereotypes: the Oriental concubine, the Muslim sheik with many wives, the African American male and his unstoppable libido. White women and the middle class were portrayed as boring and uptight.

The next century presents a cycle of nonmonogamy squeaking into popular consciousness, only to be overshadowed by international events and shifts in cultural mores. In the 1920s, free-love movements flared among flappers owning their sexuality, but the Great Depression snuffed out sexual expression. As newspapers depicted starving families and death through World War II, sexual freedom seemed frivolous. Post-war America, of course, marked another era of sexual repression.

By the 1960s and 1970s, swinging became prevalent enough to serve as a plotline in the 1969 Natalie Wood vehicle *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice,* which finished as one of the year's highest-grossing films. Although swinging is now remembered as sex parties for multiple couples, it once involved highly organized communities that emerged only when women became aware of their right to pleasure—and their right to leave. "Swinging was a way to save the couple," says Pascar. "It came with rules so the husband and wife wouldn't develop relationships with anyone else. It allowed the woman just enough freedom so the couple wouldn't fall apart."

Swinging vanished in the face of 1980s conservatism. The Reagan administration hawked family values, with the president letting us know that "all great change in America begins at the dinner table."

In 1981, U.S. hospitals began reporting cases of terminally ill gay men. Overnight, public interest in nonmonogamy flatlined. Communities tunneled underground as the public began to blame the sexually adventurous for the AIDS crisis. (As we now know, closed-circle nonmonogamy poses no greater risk than monogamy of sexually transmitted infections. Terri Conley, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, says research indicates that most STIs come from close partners, not casual ones, because the latter practice safer sex.) As panic spread, many nonmonogamists either went monogamous or mute, making it difficult for newcomers to find like-minded people.

For this reason, little has been reported on the nonmonogamous culture of the 1980s. As 52-year-old Carlos Peñaranda remembers of the response to the AIDS epidemic within the gay community, "Nonmonogamy was generally not announced because of that whole stigma of slut-shaming and 'Oh, you're sleeping around, so you're just asking to get STDs and AIDS.' "

Many sex researchers lost funding as attention turned to HIV and AIDS and the intimate relations of gay men. Bisexual men also came under scrutiny out of concern they could spread HIV to unknowing wives. Gay male relationships shifted profoundly, now needing to meld caretaking with romance and familial bonding.

Meanwhile, straight nonmonogamy remained nearly absent from mainstream arenas, social or academic. "Sexuality studies in general experienced a significant chilling with the George H.W. Bush administration," says sociologist Eli Sheff, an educational consultant and respected pioneer in polyamory research. "They very much wanted to fund Christian things, so even AIDS

Dani had entered polyamory expecting it to be about fucking.

research was out of vogue, and sex positivity was not going to fly." (Not that things are dramatically better now: In 2011, Sheff's own career became a cautionary tale when she was denied tenure at Georgia State University because of her lack of grant funding; she has been a visiting professor ever since.)

A well-known, large-scale survey of U.S. sexual behaviors, *The Social Organization of Sexuality,* by sociologists at the University of Chicago, launched with the hope of support from the National Institutes of Health, but the U.S. Senate, led by conservative stalwart Jesse Helms, denied funding. Named a *New York Times Book Review* "notable book of the year" upon its eventual release in 1994, the book of the same name is still illuminating: Religious people had just as many recent sex partners as the nonreligious, and people in conservative areas had the same transgressive urges as everyone else, though they were less likely to act on them.

This brings us to the first known uses of the word *polyamory.* The earliest may be in a 1990 essay called "A Bouquet of Lovers: Strategies for Responsible Open Relationships" by Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart. An online forum called alt.polyamory appeared in 1992. In-person meet-ups, such as the Loving More Conference, followed, spurring a new wave of community. As with other marginal groups, the internet allowed people to connect, and polyamory thrived.

The Ethical Slut, a 1997 book that describes how to be caringly promiscuous, became a bible of sorts. Meg-John Barker, a longtime researcher on nonmonogamy and a senior lecturer in psychology at the U.K.'s Open University, says such codifying books and internet groups led to "coherent identities and more shared understandings of how to do open nonmonogamy, with practices becoming more nuanced, sophisticated and diverse." The Polyamory Leadership Network, "a loose association" of about 180 activists, launched online in 2008 and has since created an "accountability pod," to collect stories of problematic behavior, and a "survivor support pod," focused on victims.

In short, communities helped polyamory develop a lexicon. Smart people once again began to keep tabs, legitimizing the lifestyle. The first European conference devoted to nonmonogamy, the International Conference on Polyamory and Mono-Normativity, convened in 2005. Universities began to extend funding again. Conley says she told faculty interviewers at the University of Michigan that her research was "not really fundable, so if I need big grants to get tenure, we can all just go home." They hired her. She's now among the top researchers in the field.

• • •

After leaving Robert, Dani moved into her own apartment and studied *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory,* a popular read among newcomers. She wishes she had consulted it earlier. While most polyamory beginners hurt people accidentally, she found herself bewildered by a larger shift in her identity. "It was confusing for me, because while I wanted to open up romantic relationships, I realized I also wanted to just be more physical, like with friends. Sitting closely or having our arms around each other or even holding hands—I wanted to be more warm," she says.

Dani had entered polyamory expecting it to be about fucking but found a new way of thinking altogether: primarily, that relationships can be fluid. This made her reassess the boundaries around her other relationships. She became poly solo, a term for dating multiple lovers while maintaining one's own finances and home. Her new girlfriend "took to polyamory like water," she says.

Some forms of nonmonogamy have better odds of success than others. Conley's studies show that swinging and polyamorous relationships do "just as well or better" than monogamous relationships in categories including trust, overall satisfaction, commitment, satisfaction with last encounter and rate of orgasm. But when Conley asked a group of her graduate students whether everyone should practice consensual nonmonogamy, the answer was a unanimous no. "They had read the research," she says. To sum up, dating and sex take time and emotional energy—a lot of emotional energy—and intensive processing. "It's perfectly reasonable that most people would be monogamous in our current societal structure. It's a lot simpler to navigate life," she says. Allow me to add another downside: Polyamory's emphasis on meeting one's own needs can translate into narcissism.

Dani discovered the complexities of nonmonogamy experientially. After seven months apart, she and Robert reconciled. They now keep separate homes and identify as polyamorous.

For most straight younger people today, the popular form of nonmonogamy is nonhierarchical polyamory, according to *More Than Two.* (At 496 pages, the book is far from comprehensive: "We didn't include things like what to do if a partner breaks an agreement," co-author Franklin Veaux says.) Different from the stability of "anchor partners," the cornerstone of nonhierarchical polyamory

is egalitarianism. A partner of 20 years, for example, does not outrank a new flame. This scenario is the antithesis of arrangements in which primary partners have veto power over other partners.

Gay men tend to distinguish sexual partners from romantic ones. Peñaranda and his husband, Daniel Leyva, decided to open their relationship after six years of monogamy. Leyva is 17 years Peñaranda's junior; this marriage is his first gay relationship. Peñaranda, who had always practiced monogamy, was not initially thrilled about the prospect of opening up. "I had gotten hurt a number of times with guys stepping out on me when we were supposed to have a monogamous relationship, and I didn't want that to be the case here," he says. "But Daniel is young. He wanted to experience things."

Note that Peñaranda's decision was based not on promiscuity but on preserving his relationship. That was also the case for Dani and Robert. Nevertheless, jealousy often arises.

"We laid down some ground rules," Peñaranda says. "We always have to be honest with each other and put each other first. No romantic dates. We're each other's number ones. There have been a few times we've said, 'I'm not exactly feeling like number one right now,' and we backtrack and fix it."

Peñaranda and Leyva got prescriptions for Truvada, a preexposure prophylaxis (or PrEP) that reduces the risk of HIV transmission. The rise of PrEP (which can be prescribed across the gender spectrum) has allowed gay men to have more casual sex, though gay and bisexual men on PrEP are 72 percent more likely to get STIs than gay and bi men not on the medication, according to a 2018 study published in the journal *AIDS*. When it comes to STIs, volume matters: Having unprotected sex with more than five partners a year increases STI risk significantly.

Like Dani and Robert, Peñaranda and Leyva began their open relationship by using dating apps, which procured them a group of friends with benefits. "We go to pool parties and stuff that are not called sex parties, but sex happens there. They always have a play area," Peñaranda says. As often happens in open relationships involving well-known play partners—or people with whom one has sexual relations often—the rules slowly began to lift. The limitations Peñaranda gave Leyva regarding certain sex acts disappeared. "Now he can go have whatever fun he wants," Peñaranda says nonchalantly.

Yet gay nonmonogamy, like straight nonmonogamy, continues to be an open secret, even with more of the population participating. (A 2016 U.K. survey by gay men's health charity GMFA reported more than 40 percent of its 1,006 gay respondents had been in an open relationship.) "Even now I don't go, 'Hi, I'm in an open relationship,' " says Peñaranda. "I'm very protective of Daniel and of our lives, so I pick and choose who I let know."

As director of prevention research at the Ontario HIV Treatment Network, Barry Adam has "interviewed sizable numbers of couples who, it turns out, have other partners—a third person or individual additional partners." But, he says, "even within those communities, there isn't much talk about it." He suggests the cultural adoption of gay marriage may have stymied frank conversations, because society presumed gay marriages were monogamous, as that's the presumption built into heterosexual marriages. "This creates a public silence about what's really going on," Adam says. "The public version is different than the practice."

Despite increasing interest, polyamory is far from accepted. Polyamorists can be fired by companies with morality clauses. "There are very few legal protections for openly nonmonogamous people, or ways of having their relationships recognized," says Barker. Even Sheff, who writes a column for *Psychology Today* called "The Polyamorists Next Door" and who does not identify as polyamorous, has faced professional blowback regarding her polyamory research. "I've had quite a few people question my science in a very aggressive way. It's as though they feel personally attacked. Maybe their dad cheated on their mom, or they're cheating right now and have personal issues around it."

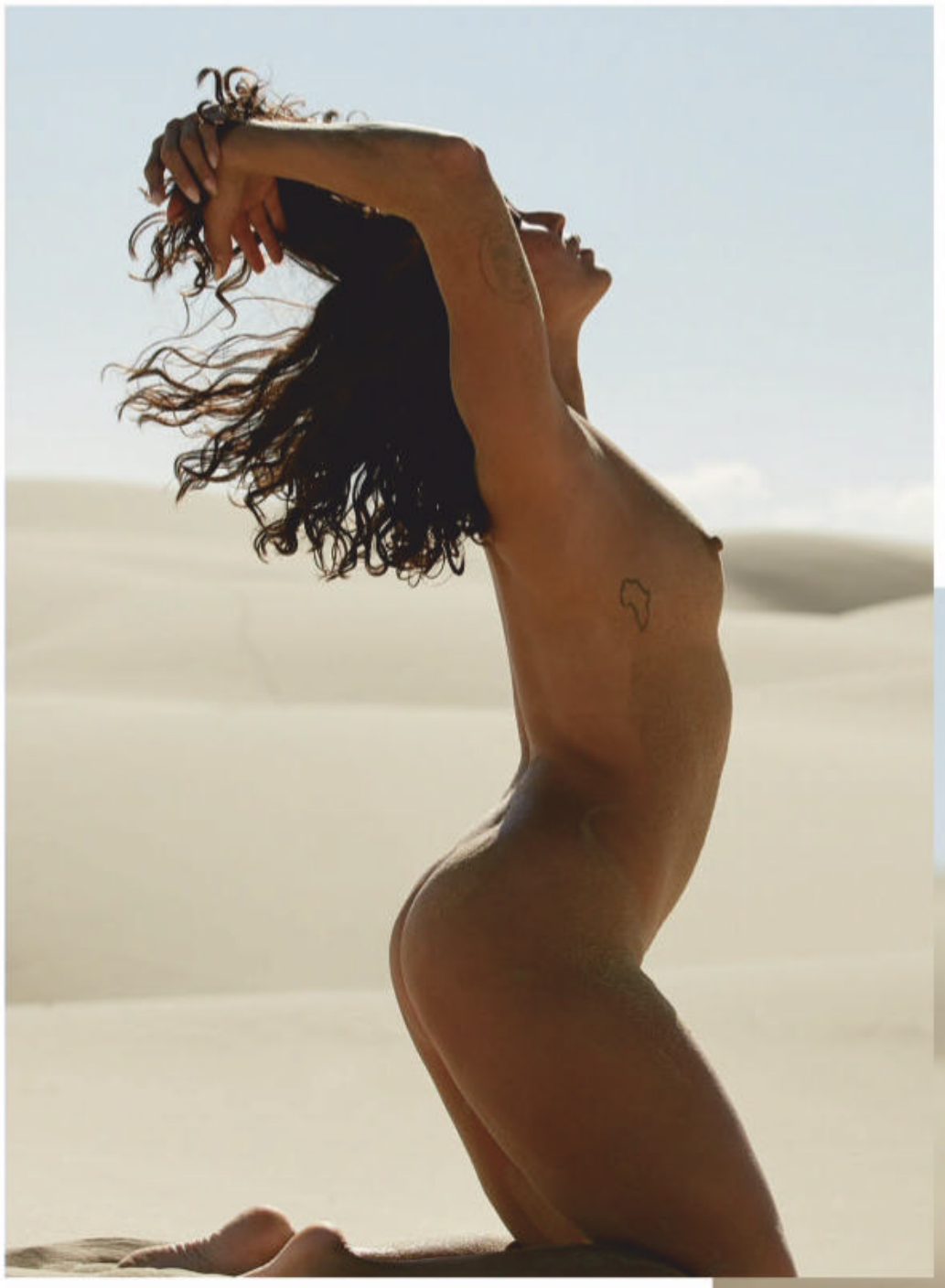
Amy Moors, an assistant professor of psychology at Chapman University, studied Google searches from 2006 to 2015. She found that searches for polyamory have increased significantly since 2011. Barring an international crisis, we can expect nonmonogamy to continue to evolve—and be fetishized—though it's far from being widely embraced. Generation Z likely won't adopt it as a dominant lifestyle choice (the way putting off marriage is now popular among millennials, for example), but the next wave in the dating pool—and Generation Alpha—may be willing to consider more relationship varieties en masse. As research indicates, monogamy doesn't work for everyone, nor does it work all the time. At minimum, a seat at the table for consensual nonmonogamy raises the possibility of gabbing about it with co-workers at lunch. Maybe then we'll all finally start talking about it together. ■

fo real

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ALI MITTON**

STYLING BY KELLEY ASH

The powerful undulations of California's coastal dunes are the perfect backdrop for April Playmate ***Fo Porter***



I started modeling in Los Angeles when I was 19 years old, after my agency, Nous Models, discovered me on *America's Next Top Model*. After five years, my natural womanly body started to emerge. I worked successfully as a "straight sized" model for many years, but as my body changed and clearly wasn't going to get back to where it had been at 19, I started to think, What next? What would I do if not modeling?

I got my Pilates certification as a backup plan, I got married, I grew out my pixie into a curly fringe, and I let my natural self shine, knowing all this goodness would guide the way! More and more I started eating what I wanted, working out and being healthy on my own terms. I truly started accepting who I was naturally.

Luckily for me, around this time the industry started to change. We saw a plus-size model on the cover of *Vogue,* and more clients were looking for curvy models. That's when things truly fell into place organically. My clients wanted me exactly how I was: curvy, with curly hair and tons of personality! This movement in the industry was a breath of fresh air for a lot of us models with curves of any size.

PLAYBOY came out of nowhere, and being a lifelong fan of the magazine, I knew the only answer was "Yes!" Ever since my friend Brook Power, who was 2017 Playmate of the Year, shot for PLAYBOY two months post-pregnancy, I thought, "Damn, girl! Get it! That is not only empowering but so incredibly badass in my book!" I wanted to feel that open, honest, confident and liberated. As Brook inspired me, I hope to inspire and empower any woman who is struggling with her natural shape or has had challenges embracing who she is. People need to know there is no such thing as "the perfect bod."

I am proud of how far I've come, and though it was not easy, I believe nothing great comes easily. No matter your sex or sexual orientation, I truly believe you have every right to feel proud of your existence. Considering I am a gay boy trapped in a woman's body, the best advice I've ever taken is from my fairy godmother, Ms. RuPaul Charles: "Honey, if you can't love yo'self, how in the hell you gonna love someone else? Can I get an amen up in here?" Let's *all* say it together, readers: *Amen!*

You have every
right to feel proud
of your existence.

DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: Phoenix, Arizona **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

ON DEEP ROOTS

I grew up in Albuquerque, a small city no one ever leaves. I'm part of the one percent who were able to get out. I love my city and the people there, but you can get stuck. I was trying to get pregnant before I left because that was the norm for a girl my age: getting married and having a family. I realized that wasn't what I wanted.

ON KIDS

I used to be a preschool teacher. Children are so innocent; they say anything and everything. They don't filter. They'll tell you how you look and how they feel. They'll tell you if you smell or if your face is crooked. It's a genuine interaction, and I love that.

ON TRYING OUT

I watched *America's Next Top Model* religiously from the age of 12 until I got on the show. Tyra Banks has always been my idol. I auditioned when I was still a teacher. My mom told me the show was in Phoenix and that I should try out. I was like, "I don't think that would work." She said, "What do you have to lose? Just do it." And the rest is history.

ON RITUAL

I recently went to Morocco. I experienced sensory overload—the smells, the tastes, the people running in front of you—but the culture is true to its history. They have the call to prayer five times a day. Everyone quiets down and bows their heads. It's beautiful.

ON THE FORCE

I love the *Star Wars* saga. *Return of the Jedi* is my favorite movie. I love the new movies that are coming out too, but *Return of the Jedi* is empowering, forceful and so good. Carrie Fisher was a bona fide badass.

ON FANDOM

I was a comics nerd from the womb. I do cosplay: Princess Leia was my first character, then Storm from *X-Men,* Chun-Li from *Street Fighter II,* Gene Simmons from Kiss, Boba Fett, a full-body-painted Venom, and I was Lara Croft at least five times for Halloween growing up. Comic-Con, where are you? Who do I talk to to get in this year?

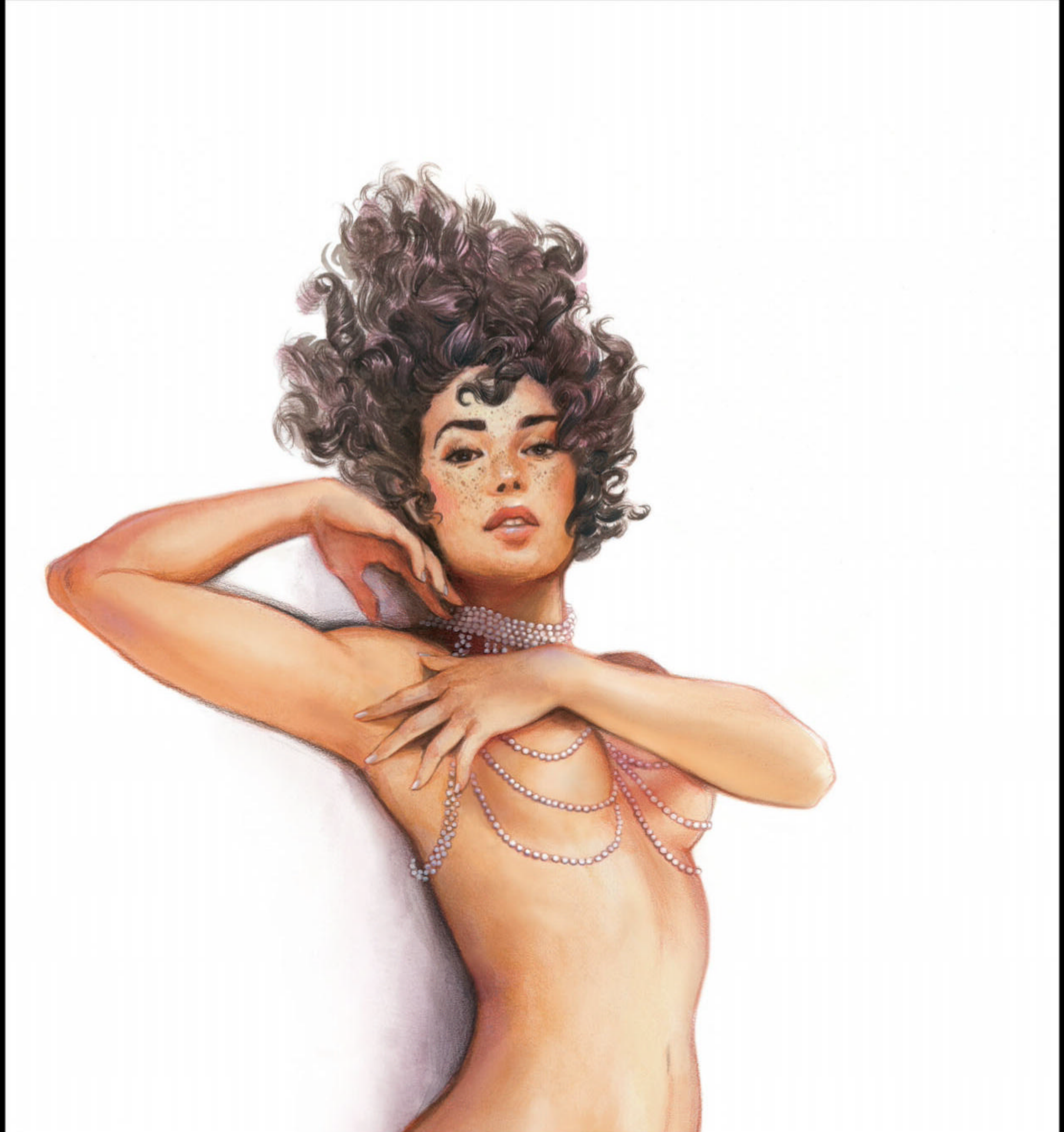
ON STYLE

I'm a huge tomboy. My favorite shoes are my low-top flame Vans. I like to say my style is Gwen Stefani. Any era, every-thing she wears, I'm like, *Yes, yes, yes!*

ON REST AND RELAXATION

My perfect day is waking up, opening a window to the elements—the ocean or a beautiful landscape—and just having my husband, my dog, a glass of wine and a joint. I'm always on the go, but I love taking time for myself.

APRIL 2019 PLAYMATE



APRIL 2019 PLAYMATE

THE GREEN SCARE

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HAS BEEN CENSORING GOVERNMENT SCIENTISTS, SIDELINING FEDERAL WORKERS AND DISCOUNTING EVIDENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE. IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE THE PLANET?

BY
CIARA O'ROURKE

On November 8, 2017, exactly one year after Donald Trump was elected president, the official Twitter account of Joshua Tree National Park had something to say. "An overwhelming consensus—over 97 percent—of climate scientists agree that human activity is the driving force behind today's rate of global temperature increase," the account tweeted. "Natural factors that impact the climate are still at work, but cannot account for today's rapid warming."

It was a sunny, dry desert day in Joshua Tree, with temperatures climbing to 75 degrees. Only five months earlier, President Trump had withdrawn the United States from the Paris Agreement, a commitment by 184 countries to curb global warming and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by implementing new environmental policies. As Joshua Tree's Twitter feed stated in a follow-up tweet, "Emissions from burning of fossil fuels have increased the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This amplifies the greenhouse effect. Human activity is affecting the land, oceans, & atmosphere, altering the balance of the climate system & causing global changes."

Michael Mann, an outspoken climate scientist and Pennsylvania State University professor who earlier that year had rebuked a congressional committee for dismissing scientific research, thanked @JoshuaTreeNPS for its tweets, albeit with an ominous note. "I hope this account remains active and in your hands…," he posted.

Perhaps more than any president before him, Trump understands the power of social media, and @JoshuaTreeNPS's tweets undercut the president's views on climate change. Trump has called global warming a Chinese hoax and doubts whether humans are even contributing to it. One of his first actions as president was placing a social-media gag order on departments such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture.

Many of the president's political appointees have expressed similar doubts about human-caused climate change. Scott Pruitt, who helmed the EPA from February 2017 to July 2018, once said scientists aren't certain human activity is "a primary contributor." Energy Secretary Rick Perry argues that natural causes, not carbon dioxide, are the main drivers. And Ryan Zinke, who resigned from Trump's Cabinet in December 2018, has said the cause of climate change "is far from being definitively resolved."

Zinke's former domain, the Department of the Interior, employs scientists and natural resource managers across its many bureaus and offices, including the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Park Service. In all, the department employs some 70,000 people. After Joshua Tree's account tweeted about climate change, Zinke reportedly summoned the park's superintendent, David Smith, to Washington, D.C.

According to a December 2017 story published by *The Hill,* Zinke brought Smith to his office to reprimand him. "Zinke made it clear to Smith that the Trump administration doesn't want national parks to put out official communication on climate change," *The Hill* reported. Zinke's office disputed that description of the meeting.

Michael Halpern, deputy director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, says the situation was "absurd." But it is also worrying, and a warning to all national park employees "that they're going to get the same kind

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DEREK BRAHNEY**

of tongue-lashing if they share anything about global warming," he says. "It only takes a few scapegoats to send a message to an entire agency that they should be keeping their heads down."

Kyla Bennett, a former EPA scientist and lawyer who now works with the nonprofit watchdog group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), speaks every day to scientists working for the government. "People are frightened," she says. "They're frightened they're being watched, that their cell phones are going to be confiscated and looked at, that their personal computers are going to be confiscated. They are afraid. "

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Last year, the Union of Concerned Scientists and Iowa State University surveyed scientists from 16 federal agencies about their experiences working in the Trump administration. The report, "Science Under President Trump," includes accounts of censorship, self-censorship and political interference. About 630 survey respondents at agencies that work on climate change, or 18 percent of the sample group, agreed or strongly agreed that they had been asked to omit the phrase *climate change* from their work.

"We've been told to avoid using words like *climate change* in internal project proposals and cooperative agreements," reported one respondent from the National Park Service.

Another 700 respondents said they'd avoided working on climate change or using the phrase despite having received no explicit orders to do so. "Survey results also suggest that communication issues extend beyond censorship of science to the right of scientists to speak about their work to the public, the news media and at professional meetings," the report stated.

This winter, PLAYBOY interviewed more than a dozen current and former federal employees, climate scientists and advocacy groups about how federal employees discuss climate science under the Trump administration. Some describe being sidelined or point to scientists scrubbing the phrase *climate change* from reports and grant applications. Others say they can't comfortably mention global warming for fear of coming under scrutiny.

Their stories aren't universal. Scientists at some agencies say the administration hasn't hindered their work. But many others express deep fears about both job stability and their research. They don't want to risk disrupting the continuity of climate-change data, some of which has been collected over decades, by drawing unfavorable attention to their studies. All but one current federal employee we interviewed asked to remain anonymous.

"Everyone is so terrified," says Betsy Southerland, who worked at the EPA for more than 30 years and retired as director of science and technology in the agency's water office in July 2017. Before she left, staffers authoring technical reports were already replacing the phrase *climate change* with *extreme weather events,* Southerland says. "We were self-censoring."

The reason for that, she explains, is EPA employees want to protect their ability to release research that has been under way for years, well before Trump's election.

Michael Cox, a climate-change advisor who resigned after 25 years with the EPA, noticed self-censorship in the Seattle office where he worked. People stopped saying "climate change" in meetings, he says, adding that the "climate-ready water utilities" program turned into "creating resilient water utilities." Overall, employees seemed uncertain about what they could or couldn't say and write.

On March 31, 2017, Cox submitted his resignation letter to Pruitt. He was out the door. He could safely make some noise.

"I am writing this note because I, along with many EPA staff, are becoming increasing [*sic*] alarmed about the direction of EPA under your leadership," he wrote. Cox criticized the administration for denying fundamental climate science, slashing the budget and appointing political staffers openly hostile to the agency. "If, by some miracle you or your staff actually read this note, I can only hope you take a step back and realize that you are the leader of an organization of very hardworking, dedicated professionals who believe deeply in their work."

It turns out someone did read Cox's letter. Ten days later, a lawyer filed a public-records request for Cox's correspondence when he resigned, according to *The New York Times*. The resulting e-mails revealed the names of dozens of agency officials, including ones Cox describes as colleagues who shared his concerns over management. The agency, which did not respond to PLAYBOY's interview request, later hired the same lawyer to do "media monitoring" at the EPA.

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Federal employees, when working, don't have the same free-speech rights as private citizens. Legally, it's a distinction between right and privilege, a precedent set by the 2006 Supreme Court case *Garcetti v. Ceballos,* in which the court ruled that speech by a public official isn't protected when expressed as part of their job.

Jeff Ruch, executive director of PEER, says this distinction is being wielded for partisan ends. According to Ruch, George Luber, an environmental health professor and leading expert on the disease effects of climate change, has been under investigation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention since March 2018, in part because he didn't get renewed agency approval to write a 2015 textbook. The head of the CDC's former Climate and Health Program (established in 2009 and effectively discontinued in December), Luber is now barred from going to his government office without permission, and if he does enter the office, he and his car are searched, according to Ruch. Luber is forbidden from speaking, responding to interview requests or answering congressional inquiries. Luber's dismissal was recommended in October, Ruch says, but walked back after Ruch took the story to *The New York Times*. Ruch suspects the CDC was self-censoring because Luber is a prominent voice in the science community. The CDC did not answer questions about Luber or about how its employees can discuss climate change at work and in public.

Ruch calls PEER a "shelter for battered staff." He also fields queries from scientists trying to publish their research, as only two of the 18 federal science-based agencies surveyed allow employees to submit their work to a publication without prior approval.

"There's no doubt the Trump administration is editing scientific documents to the point where they're removing, for example, references to anthropogenic causes of climate change," PEER's Bennett says. "They are eliminating entire climate jobs and teams. It has gotten to the point where federal employees are afraid to even use the words."

According to Bennett, department heads in many cases haven't officially directed scientists to stop using the phrase *climate change,* but "they've gotten the message loud and clear." They abide, she says, because their positions are precarious and they don't want to risk losing them. Some scientists will communicate with Bennett only through encrypted mobile apps; others call from burner phones.

Halpern, of the Union of Concerned Scientists, thinks some of the challenges over letting federal employees speak freely to the public and press stem from the aftermath of September 11. Under the guise of national-security concerns, federal employees became less accessible and control over speech from government workers increased significantly, he says.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is one of the most permissive agencies: NOAA employees don't need permission to talk to reporters, the agency said in an e-mail to PLAYBOY. U.S. Geological Survey employees, by comparison, must be granted permission before speaking to the press. "CDC scientists were told last year they needed to check with superiors before complying with even the most basic data requests from the press," Halpern says. "We know people are less likely to tell the unvarnished truth if their bosses are listening or if they feel they'll be reprimanded for saying the wrong thing in the eyes of their political superiors."

That pressure is not felt evenly by all employees. Because the EPA is a regulatory agency tasked with enforcing rules on businesses and protecting endangered species, staffers may face more political and public scrutiny. But there are also unwritten rules, Halpern says: "Most nefarious is that a lot of directives aren't written down or communicated. They're simply hinted at."

Joel Clement was the director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the Department of the Interior. He was at home in his Washington apartment when a friend called one Thursday night in June

NO ADMINISTRATION IS PERFECT, "BUT WHAT WE'RE SEEING NOW IS UNPRECEDENTED."

2017. "Check your e-mail," his friend said. He had been reassigned, and he wondered if Clement had also been removed from his position. A message was waiting for Clement in his in-box. He too had been reassigned, in his case to a job in an accounting office overseeing royalty income from oil and gas operations around the country. It was part of a purge, he alleges. DOI did not respond to questions about Clement.

No supervisor spoke to Clement before his reassignment, but he says he fared better than some of his colleagues, who had been forced to move across the country with their families to begin unfamiliar jobs. Many were shifted into positions for which they were ill-suited. Clement counted himself in that group: He wasn't an accountant. But, he says, when he reported to work at his new office, the employees were wonderful, bending over backward to try to train their new boss on something he knew nothing about.

Eventually, though, having lost the job he left the private sector for, "I decided to keep my voice," he says. Clement reported what had happened to the Office of Special Counsel in July, and in October he resigned.

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Former U.S. Representative Lamar Smith, who was chair of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee before the Republicans lost their majority in the 2018 midterms, chastised scientists two years ago for ignoring "the basic tenets of science" and pushing a personal agenda to justify claims about climate change. "Alarmist predictions amount to nothing more than wild guesses," he said.

It was March 29, 2017, and Penn State's Michael Mann, who was appearing before the committee to discuss global warming, fired back. "If you get attacked every time you publish an article," he said, "if that causes you to become subject to congressional inquiries and Freedom of Information Act requests, obviously that's very stifling, and I think the intention is to cause scientists to retreat." The message to "the entire research community," he said, "is if you too publish and speak out on the threat of human-caused climate change, we're going to come after you."

Many were wary of the Texas representative's subpoena powers after Trump was elected. (IF YOU LIKED THE INQUISITION,

you'll love the house science committee, read one *Mother Jones* headline.) But Smith had warred with scientists during Barack Obama's presidency too. In 2015 he subpoenaed hundreds of internal e-mails from NOAA staffers after an agency scientist produced a study that found there was never a global-warming hiatus, as some believed.

Halpern remembers Smith's request as a "huge intimidation tactic"—but, he says, "attacks on government scientists predate this administration. It's not something the Trump administration invented, but it's something they've aggressively pursued."

PEER's Bennett, for example, was a whistle-blower at the EPA during the Clinton administration and considers her previous work nonpartisan. Both Republicans and Democrats have interfered with science or regulatory enforcement to a certain extent, she says. But both environmental enforcement and science overall are suffering the most under the current administration.

Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, who has contributed to multiple federally mandated National Climate Assessment reports, asserts that when President George W. Bush was in office, there "absolutely was censorship. The Bush administration's approach was to edit or censor documents themselves." Hayhoe, who teaches at Texas Tech University, adds, "You'd send a draft in for review and you'd get these comments back and be like, 'Well, you know, this is not accurate.' "

Since Trump was elected, Hayhoe has received dispatches from her federal colleagues about research proposals languishing on desks, awaiting political reviews that weren't required in previous administrations. Or research proposals being rejected or refused by political appointees. Funding woes. Self-policing.

"If you don't have to say 'climate change,' don't say it," she says, "because it's like waving a red flag to a bull." No administration is perfect, says Lauren Kurtz, executive director of the Climate Science Legal Defense Fund. Every modern administration has been accused of politicizing science—"but I do think what we're seeing now is unprecedented."

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"It's not a secret the Trump administration is not a fan of science," says U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientist Mark Williams (not his real name). But he hasn't been told explicitly or through veiled threats to distance himself and his work from climate science. "The mandate is to use the best available science, and that hasn't changed," says Williams, who has worked at the USFWS for about a decade.

The agency has, though. Sally Jewell, interior secretary under Obama, would send weekly video updates to staff; at press time, the USFWS under Trump remained without a director two years into his term. Still, Williams says, "the tendrils of the administration really go down only so far." With some restrictions, scientists are free to talk about their research with the public, says USFWS chief of public affairs Gavin Shire.

Thomas Miller (not his real name) supports the military's scientific research in the Arctic and has worked for the federal government for more than a decade. During this time, he says, the mandate has been constant and clear: Employees who are not public affairs officers do not speak to the public. He keeps a personal Facebook page, where he posts updates and the results of research, but he tries to keep it apolitical. He was concerned, though, when he read reports after Trump's election that the incoming administration was stripping data from public websites. When a guerrilla science movement emerged to preserve that information on independent sites, Miller shared the locations of some data sets with the organizers to save that information.

Outside his work group, Miller generally doesn't talk about climate change—but not because a superior has suggested he shouldn't. "The military as a whole skews conservative," he says. "It's not worth getting into conversations with people who are sitting there denying science."

More broadly, he thinks conservatism is the root of what he calls a "chilling effect" on science in the federal government. But Todd Lewis (not his real name), a research scientist at NOAA, says the political appointees at that agency "are actually fairly well-informed people, which I don't believe to be the case for most of the political appointees for other jobs. At this stage, unlike at the EPA, our research isn't being heavily impacted."

He has noticed pushback on press releases, but he says that was common in previous Republican administrations. Ideally, a press release will include context to educate the public about the issue, but today there's more pressure to stick only with what appears in the research the agency is publicizing.

Notably, in November the Trump administration did not publicize volume two of the *Fourth National Climate Assessment* report, which concludes that humans are causing climate change. It is a massive and dire study that federal and volunteer scientists, including Hayhoe, one of the lead authors, spent years working on. The government instead quietly released the

findings on Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year.

Volume two is endorsed by 13 federal agencies, including the EPA and the Department of Defense. As media attention on the publication grew, the president's administration began to disavow its findings, suggesting it was biased or problematic. Trump said he didn't believe it.

Hayhoe estimates that in the more than two years she spent working on the latest *Climate Assessment,* she could have published up to 10 of her own studies. The report involved hundreds of unpaid hours of work for others too. As someone not employed by the federal government, Hayhoe feels a responsibility to speak carefully and clearly on behalf of the hundreds of scientists who worked on the report. Many can't speak for themselves, she says.

"This *Assessment* was a sacrifice by every single person," Hayhoe says. "But it was a sacrifice made with full awareness that the climate is changing. It's us. It's here, and every human on the planet and especially in the United States needs to understand how climate change is already affecting us and the places we live. We feel a moral responsibility to share what we know."

Hundreds of scientists have left the federal government since Trump took office. His election could disrupt the next generation of scientists, young graduates who "have decided not to go into this area because of uncertainty," says Jim White, an environmental scientist and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Of course, thousands of scientists still work for the government. Todd Lewis, at NOAA, says they're keeping their heads down. "We have to keep our records going," he says. "We can't afford to play political games and risk long-term records somehow being interrupted."

There is another concern among scientists and their advocates: that the *Fifth National Climate Assessment,* due in 2022, will come under heightened scrutiny. They fear other projects will be canceled or more workers will abandon the agencies for posts where they can work more freely. But the biggest loss, according to Mark Williams of the USFWS, is time. Even if in two (or six) years environmental policies are reinstated and regulations again enforced, the planet will not have stopped warming.

"A lot of things can change pretty much immediately as soon as a new administration takes office," he says. "But you never get that time back."

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Many climate scientists have changed the way they talk about global warming. Hayhoe says the most effective place to start a conversation on climate change is by finding common ground. An evangelical Christian, she tries to connect with people over their values—having enough clean water to grow crops, say. And she's not alone: A growing cadre is framing climate change as a moral and ethical dilemma, according to White. From his perch as a professor, White is watching recent graduates take jobs that allow them to blend science with advocacy—working at Protect Our Winters, for example—and lobby for climate-friendly policies.

"It's a really strange world when obvious physical truths are pushed aside by tweets and Facebook posts that are clearly wrong but manage to capture people's attention," he says. As a scientist and an educator, he's worried about this trend. It undermines the scientific business model. But, he reasons, it also compels scientists to learn how to advocate for their discipline. They're becoming more literate on how to effectively talk to laymen.

Take Michael Cox, the former climate-change advisor who resigned from the EPA. He has reached a point where he doesn't believe the science of climate change will gain traction with most people. "We've politicized this as a science debate," he says. "It's not a science debate. It's a values debate. Crossing the mountain pass from western Washington to the more rural and conservative east side, you aren't going to talk about climate change. You ask them about water."

"Scientists have sat on the sidelines for a long time," says Clement, who now works to expose political interference in science for the Union of Concerned Scientists. He and his colleagues were taught to maintain their integrity or stay neutral. But "they're the ones who most need to speak up right now."

Meanwhile, Hayhoe would welcome the opportunity to connect with Trump, but only if he were genuinely interested in engaging on the subject—and so far, she's seen no evidence of that. But if she ever does, she knows what she would say to him: "The world stands at a turning point, which may determine civilization. Do you want to be remembered as the hero who saved the world?" ■

DAVID HARBOUR

INTERVIEW BY **MICHAEL TEDDER**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TAYLOR MILLER**

THE *STRANGER THINGS* BREAKOUT GOES DEEP ON MENTAL ILLNESS, ADDICTION, DEATH THREATS AND OTHER STOPS ON THE ROAD TO *HELLBOY*—HIS FIRST (AND CERTAINLY NOT LAST) STINT AS A MAINSTREAM LEADING MAN

Q1: *You have been on five episodes of Law & Order. Did you ever get to a point where you thought, Really? Another one?*

HARBOUR: Wait, let me count: I've been on two normal *Law & Order*s, two *Criminal Intent*s and one *SVU*. I call it the Dick Wolf Subsidy for the Theater Arts in New York City, because it's the job everyone gets when they're doing an off-Broadway play and making $270 a week. There's no way you can pay rent on a Manhattan apartment with that kind of paycheck, yet it's a prestigious, wonderful job, so you need to do a *Law & Order* every year to supplement your income. And the funny thing is, big stars who I love recognize me from *Law & Order* more than anything else. I remember Sarah Silverman grabbing me and being like, "*Law & Order!*" And even when I showed up to work on *Stranger Things,* Winona Ryder's big thing was my silver-thief character from a *Criminal Intent* episode. So yeah, there was a certain David Harbour cult following in the Hollywood community around my work on *Law & Order*.

Q2: *When did you first know you wanted to be an actor?*

HARBOUR: When I was five years old I played the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz,* and I loved it. I was a big hambone. Then when I got into high school I really wanted to act, but I had no examples of people who did that. I grew up in Westchester, New York, which was a lot of businesspeople, lawyers, doctors—a very upper-middle-class community. There were no examples of a working actor, so I didn't think it was possible. I went to college and tried to study some other things, but then when I got to New York I realized, right out of college, that I just had to do it. And so I waited tables.

Q3: *You've been very open about the fact that you have bipolar disorder and are neuroatypical. What does society not understand about being bipolar?*

HARBOUR: I mean, there's so much. I would like to bring some light in terms of people not viewing madness as something alien to them. There's an interesting thing in our culture where we have to brand certain things as other than us because we're so terrified of them. It's dangerous when we're segregating society so clearly into sane people and insane people, and I know that I've ridden that line. I have a lot of experiences on one side where I'm in an asylum and being treated like a crazy piece of trash, and then I've been in this other world where I'm treated like a big-deal celebrity that people have to run around getting coffee for.

Q4: *Your parents had you institutionalized when you were 25. How did that change you?*

HARBOUR: It was a voluntary institutionalization. It was recommended because I was having your garden-variety manic episode that a lot of bipolar people have, which is nonviolent but strange and confusing and disordered. I think the best version of a bipolar person I've ever seen done on-screen was Claire Danes in the first season of *Homeland*. She's just talking and not making much sense, but it's right on the edge of sense. It was sort of like that. You hit a wall and realize there's a wall there, and you also realize you have an internal resiliency that's beyond anything you've ever known. The idea that I lost my mind and then came back and continued to act and to live in New York City revealed in me that I have mental fortitude, and it also gave me gratitude for every day that I'm not locked up. Of course I still have stresses, but truly I can breathe easy every day and go, "There is a hell, and I've been there, and every day that I'm walking around in New York City, even if people don't like the movie I'm in, or whatever it is, I'm free."

Q5: *You attended Dartmouth College, an institution Newsweek once called one of America's drunkest colleges. Did the school live up to its party reputation?*

HARBOUR: Yes. Yes. Yes. I drank all the time in college. I had a real problem with Dartmouth. I wanted to be an actor, but I sort of felt I had to have a fallback plan or something. I did that a lot for my parents. I went to Dartmouth, and I was kind of angry and resentful and I drank a lot. You could definitely drink a lot at Dartmouth. It was cold all the time, so we would spend a lot of time in the basement, just drinking crappy beer. But I take responsibility for my problem. When I got out of Dartmouth I was in my early 20s, and I got sober. I haven't looked back.

Q6: *You don't seem like a former Dartmouth fraternity member. How did that happen?*

HARBOUR: That's the conundrum I was dealing with. I grew up in a community that wanted me to be one thing, and I had a soul that didn't want to be that thing. I felt human beings were different from me, and one way I could help to understand them was through this thing called acting. It was something I felt compelled to do. Had I had my complete druthers, I would have dropped out of high school at 16, moved to New York and auditioned and stuff, but I was in a world of prep schools and money and a certain way of being, and I didn't have enough fortitude to stand up to that. I think ultimately that's where the drinking and anger come from. Then you get out and realize over time that you might as well be yourself. I think that's what has been developing in me—even up to today.

Q7: *Let's talk Stranger Things. What did it feel like to go from being a working actor to being part of a mass cultural phenomenon?*

HARBOUR: It was super fun, but it was very unexpected. We were just hunkered down making the show, and I was completely neurotic about whether or not I was good in it and whether or not the show was good. I have no gauge anymore about whether people will like something. Then, the weekend it came out was unlike anything I've ever experienced. I've done a lot of work over the years, and usually what happens is two people from my past will text and be like, "Hey, man, you're great in *Rake*." That weekend, hundreds of people I hadn't spoken to—my phone lit up from all these contacts going, "*Stranger Things, Stranger Things, Stranger Things.*" And then these BuzzFeed articles came out about "Which *Stranger Things* character are you?" I was like, "Holy shit, I've never been a part of this." I'm so happy it happened with *Stranger Things,* because I love it so deeply.

Q8: *How about those articles on your dating history and your new status as a sex symbol?*

HARBOUR: It's a double-edged sword. It's extremely gratifying even to be acknowledged as sexy when you're in your 40s, to be acknowledged as good, for people to like what you do. It just makes you feel great. I got into this business to move people, and clearly you're moving people in positive ways, and that's a beautiful thing. For about the first three months I was on cloud nine, and then it started to become a little weird. I actually don't like to go out as much now. The fact that people assume they know you is very strange. It feels like I'm on *The Truman Show.* Everybody has an impression of me before I even meet them, even at the laundry or the deli, and that's something I haven't dealt with most of my life. And in some ways I miss my anonymity; some car will cut you off in the street and you'll go, "Motherfucker," and then they'll be like, "Oh, hey, man! You're great." And then you're like, Shit, I can't even yell at this guy!

Q9: *Do you think that as a kid you would have hung out with Mike Wheeler and the boys?*

HARBOUR: Yeah, because I think they're exactly like my crew. I was never really part of the popular kids in middle school, but I was not the nerdiest of the nerds either. There was a kind of a middle group that I feel Mike and his group occupy. People ask me sometimes which character on the show I identify with the most, and it's Noah. People thought I was a bit of a weird kid and overly sensitive, and so one of the reasons it was so fun to play Hopper was that I got to save that kid. In a way, it was like I was saving myself.

Q10: *Merriam-Webster posted a GIF of you on Twitter as a visual definition of "dad bod." You've been a good sport about it, but does it ever sting a bit?*

HARBOUR: It does, but I'm into expanding people's idea of what's sexy, because I think our culture is almost anorexic in terms of what it views as sexy. To me, human beings are sexy. If you want to exploit the fact that my body isn't perfect but you find me sexy—if it's used in that context, and sometimes it is—then I'm cool with it. Whatever gets you to broaden your scope and find your own Hopper in your world—that guy or that girl at the deli who has a beautiful soul but is a little bit fat or whatever—that's what I want to expand in this world. I'm all for working out and being healthy, but this obsession with perfection, especially physical perfection, is ludicrous, and it's ultimately a losing battle. I don't care how beautiful you are, you're going to hit 60, if you're lucky, and you're not going to look so great. You might as well enjoy yourself and other people for more than what they are physically.

Q11: *What was it like to go from being the "dad bod" champion to working with Ryan Reynolds's personal trainer to get in shape for Hellboy?*

HARBOUR: I couldn't do a lot of training because the thing is all prosthetics. A lot of what I was doing was power and strength training, and it does change your mind-set. When I'm working on a character, my subconscious starts to take over and I start to just do things and make choices like that character. When I play Hopper, it's a certain way, and then when I played Hellboy it got into this kind of bestial thing. The weight training and all that stuff kind of fueled this hulking horde—this kind of bold mentality that I really liked.

Q12: *You go above and beyond with your fans when it comes to Twitter: You attended one fan's senior-year photo shoot and officiated at another's wedding. Will you do anything for your fans?*

HARBOUR: [*Laughs*] I won't do *anything,* but I got to this place with social media in general where it had become sort of an echo chamber. No good was coming of it, but I had a lot of feelings, so I was like, What can I do that would actually make people feel good and that would put me out there a little bit? I came up with these Twitter challenges. To me, because I've been through the gamut with social

IT'S IMPORTANT, EVEN THROUGH DEPRESSION, TO LOOK AT THINGS THAT SCARE YOU.

STYLING BY MICHAEL KINNANE; OPENING PAGES: SHIRT BY KENNETH COLE, UNDERSHIRT BY HANES; THIS PAGE: T-SHIRT BY J. CREW

media, I now feel it's a bit of a game of double dare where you want me to stand on the table and quack like a chicken or whatever. Anything I can do to provide a little more joy in this weird world we're living in right now that is simple and pure and just unadulterated fun, I'm down for.

Q13: *Speaking of Twitter challenges, you got enough retweets for Greenpeace to send you to Antarctica. Do you have hope for humanity's ability to solve climate change?*

HARBOUR: The simple answer is no. I think we're in a really bad place, and I don't know, with self-centeredness the way it is, that there's any way out. So yeah, I get depressed. But I think it's important, even through your depression, to continue to look at things that scare you. It truly is the most terrifying concern of our lifetimes, and it's the concern that drives all other concerns. If you have a problem with migrant caravans or illegal immigration, that's climate change: Food shortages and surpluses are happening in different areas and places are getting destroyed, and so people have to move. Most of the political concerns around this world stem from climate change. If we could make the earth a more uniformly palatable place to live, there would be fewer wars over territory, resources and things like that.

But even in the midst of inevitable defeat, you still have to seize the struggle, right? It's kind of the idea of Albert Camus's *The Plague*: We've still got to wake up every morning and go to work even if we know we're not going to stop the plague.

Q14: *Do you want to have kids one day?*

HARBOUR: I'm on the fence. To be honest, I don't want to have a kid if in 15 years the planet is dead and they're 15 years old. Also, we do have a certain thing in our culture where we deify family. It's like when anyone has a baby everyone's like, "Oh my God!" They're so happy for them. I want to imbue people who choose not to have babies with the same joy, because the greenest thing you can do for the entire planet is not to breed. I've done it for 43 years—but you can all call me a hypocrite and not a good environmentalist when I do have a son or daughter five years from now.

Q15: *A lot of your work evokes the soulful, wounded leading men of the 1970s. Who are your acting heroes?*

HARBOUR: Certainly Jack Nicholson, Gene Hackman, Harrison Ford, Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss. All these guys from those 1970s films, which is where I learned what it was to be a man. When *Stranger Things* came along and I thought I could do that for another generation, it was so

gratifying. I don't feel we show as much on-screen—or if we do, we give some nod to a character's damage but don't actually go into it. Their damage is too unpalatable for commercial entertainment and too indulgent for independent entertainment. It's hard to find that balance of a damaged hero you can get behind.

Q16: *In 2017, Stranger Things won a Screen Actors Guild Award and you gave a fiery speech calling out bullies and making the case for empathy. Where did that come from?*

HARBOUR: It's funny, because that speech has been interpreted by a thousand different people a thousand different ways. I get death threats from the people who thought it was about Trump supporters. For me, it genuinely was a cultural statement. I thought to myself, What would Hopper do? I've been a Hollywood outcast for so many years, but I wanted to give a bit of a cultural critique of the narcissism that we contribute to a culture that makes people feel alone, as opposed to the ultimate, fundamental reason for art, which is to make people feel included. One of the things I'm so proud of about *Stranger Things* is that, like the "dad bod" thing, people can feel included. They can feel they don't need a perfect body; they don't need to be so witty and smart and strong. They don't sit back in awe of the characters; instead they actually identify with them and then see that those characters can do heroic things. In a way, we were the nerdy kids at the table, so I thought I'd get up there and say, "Let's do this together. Let's contribute to a culture that creates empathy and destroys narcissism"—as opposed to getting dressed up and sort of being Kardashian about the whole thing.

Q17: *Which were more intense, the online comments or the IRL ones?*

HARBOUR: I think I was on the front page of Reddit or whatever, but there were also neo-Nazi death threats: "We know where you live" and "We got all the guns" and "We're coming for you, you piece of shit." A lot of people come up to me and say they love that speech. I've never had someone come up to me and say, "That speech you gave was a piece of shit, you dick."

Q18: *You talked in that speech about rejecting bullies. Were you bullied at all in school?*

HARBOUR: Oh yeah, I think probably most of us were. But I don't think bullying ends when you leave school. People are bullies in all kinds of ways. I have bullying qualities that I hate about myself. So that speech is as much for me as it is for other people. It's a reminder of things that I want in this world, ideals that I don't necessarily live up to myself.

Q19: *If you had achieved your current level of success in your 20s, how do you think you would have handled it?*

HARBOUR: It would have been awful. I would have been a jerk. I would have been mean to waiters. My narcissism would have been through the roof. I would have felt entitled and deserving. But the great thing about success happening after the age of 40 is you don't really care. If there is any kind of divinity that has guided my life, it's the things that have been prevented from happening. I wanted that kind of success in my 20s, and I was prevented from having it, and then I wanted it in my 30s, and it was prevented. Finally, after I turned 35, I remember completely giving up on that dream and thinking I was too old, and then it came to me. Like, okay, I got it—when I don't care, it comes to me.

Q20: *You've said that you've felt broken and alone most of your life. Has success helped?*

HARBOUR: Yeah. I feel more assured and more confident. Success doesn't make a dent in the fundamental issues I struggle with, like human relationships, but when I'm embroiled in that brokenness or that alone feeling, I can sort of rely on "Well, at least my apartment's nice." At least I have those things to fall back on. But the core issues are a lifelong trek through therapy and self-understanding, and those issues still exist and are just a product of being alive. As human beings we're these crazy and interesting creatures that have too much consciousness for our own good, these weird fleshy things that walk around and are confused. I'm not apart from that at all. ■

ACT BAD!

BY JOHN WATERS

ACT BAD!

WITH LITERAL PISS AND FIGURATIVE VINEGAR, THE INIMITABLE DIRECTOR AND SELF-PROCLAIMED "FILTH ELDER" GIVES A MASTER CLASS ON HOW TO HARNESS HUMOR AND HORNINESS TO START A REVOLUTION

I'm a Yippie at heart, a smart-ass late-1960s fake revolutionary who even today thinks riots are a good place to get lucky for sex. A refried radical who still knows how to throw the tear gas back at the police yet is never in the front lines of a standoff where you can get squirted with fire hoses or beaten with nightsticks. I guess even then I understood that the "revolution" wasn't really going to happen, but the anarchy surrounding the idea at the time was certainly exciting. I'm white, so I never got a "rough ride" in a paddy wagon. The few times I was arrested I was always released from lockup on my own recognizance, not on bail like a poor person. I'm a brat, even at 72, and still look forward to political trouble. Civil disobedience is better than Botox any day.

God, I miss the Yippies—those "Groucho Marxists," as they were referred to by ABC News. Angry left-wing hippies who were tired of giving peace a chance and instead staged hilariously disrespectful political stunts such as throwing fake money to the crowds at the New York Stock Exchange and watching the people scramble to pick it up. Or threatening to put LSD in Chicago's water supply. "Levitating" the Pentagon with mind control during a demonstration to spook Republicans. I think I actually pissed on the Justice Department building in D.C. with a bunch of Yippies during a demonstration. You should have seen the horrified face of Attorney General John Mitchell as he watched the "piss-in" from his office window.

The Yippie leaders wrote devilish little how-to books that corrupted further the hippie ideals of the times. *Steal This Book* by Abbie Hoffman became the first best-seller that had to be kept off the shelves and under the counter for a whole new set of obvious reasons. Abbie Hoffman was my spiritual leader—a media manipulator who used humor as a weapon against his enemy. Even Andrew Breitbart, the late right-wing activist, admitted to me when we did Bill Maher's show together that Abbie had been a big influence on him—he just used the same tactics for the other side.

Paul Krassner was our "Citizen Kane." Not only did he come up with the actual word *yippie,* he wrote and edited the most radical humor magazine of my lifetime, *The Realist.* Its outrageous cover story in May 1967, "The Parts That Were Left Out of the Kennedy Book," was so timely and rude that some media outlets actually believed he had the goods on what got censored in William Manchester's book on the Kennedy assassination. Krassner's comic theory that LBJ supposedly penetrated the bullet hole in the throat of Kennedy's corpse with his penis must have been the catalyst that inspired me to shoot the entire Kennedy assassination scene with Divine playing Jackie and climbing over the trunk of the limo in that bloodied Chanel suit and pillbox hat just three months later for my film *Eat Your Makeup.*

The Berkeley Barb was another useful radical publication—a weekly paper devoted to personal sex ads (thought to be very progressive at the time) and how-to advice about ripping off the establishment. Hidden in their classifieds were the actual AT&T codes, which changed annually, enabling you to invent phony working credit card numbers to make free long-distance calls before there was such a thing as a cell phone. I remember fondly ripping off Ma Bell in phone booths all across the country for years thanks to *The Berkeley Barb*'s illegal consumer guide.

The radical left was so homophobic that gay men were rare in the Yippie world until Jim Fouratt, one of the first gay activists, showed up at a rally to support Huey Newton at Yale University in New Haven and came out in between Black Panther speeches to rant about gay rights. Blacks may have had their Jim Crow laws to protest, but now it was time for "Mary Crow" laws to crumble too! Both the Panther men and the white Yippie men blanched at Fouratt's demands. Here was a new militancy that completely threatened the left's macho ideas. With no way to assimilate, these straight-guy leaders of both races were suddenly behind the times. All in one afternoon.

Lesbians had always had a gripe with left-wing men's misogyny, but when *Rat* magazine came out and combined dyke power with militant feminist hetero-rage *and* a sense of humor against male pig behavior to women, a new Yippie message was born. The fully nude cover shots of "slum goddesses" announced that some left-wing men risked getting their asses kicked if something didn't change. Underarm hair on women became the new rallying cry against the hippie male gaze. Fags and dykes together were a definite new wing of defiance.

Yet, was I the only gay man in the movement at the time who still felt excluded and hurt that there were no out queer men leaders in the Weathermen? How about the Chicago 7? Nope. All straight men. Did prophet John Africa tell any black gay men to join his back-to-nature group Move before *or* after the first shoot-out with Philadelphia police? If so, I never heard about them. Was I the only gay activist in the world who felt discriminated against when I realized there were no homos inside the Manson Family? Come on, Charlie, even the most insane, ridiculous or dangerous cult needs a little faggotry to ignite a revolution. I'm glad you're dead. *You* were the piggy. A hetero one.

ACT UP finally came to the rescue, but many of my gay friends had to die of AIDS before that happened. Sure, at first there was the Radical Faeries group, but they were a little too hippie-dippie for me, and besides, I'd look stupid wearing wings and living in the woods of Guerneville. ACT UP took AIDS militancy *and* the idea of public theater, then mixed lesbian *and* gay men's anger, and used it to wake up the world about the AIDS crisis. Larry Kramer may have been strident and obnoxious to some, but without his endless ranting about the slow testing of

EXCERPTED FROM *MR. KNOW-IT-ALL: THE TARNISHED WISDOM OF A FILTH ELDER* BY JOHN WATERS. PUBLISHED BY FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, MAY 21, 2019. COPYRIGHT © 2019 JOHN WATERS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

COLLEGE STUDENTS, STOP STUDYING! GET YOUR LAZY OVEREDUCATED ASSES OUT IN THE STREETS WHERE YOU BELONG.

AIDS medications, many of my HIV-positive friends who barely made the cut between AZT and the new drugs of today would be no longer with us.

ACT UP were the warriors we always needed, chaining themselves to a New York Stock Exchange balcony to protest the high cost of AIDS treatment or shutting down the Food and Drug Administration for a day to press for a cure. Not since *One* magazine, the first gay radical publication, published the headline I AM GLAD I AM A HOMOSEXUAL, in 1958 (!), had there been such unsissy brave militancy, such in-your-face defiance! When one "affinity group" of ACT UP in New York City performed a brief memorial at Judson church for AIDS victim Mark Fisher ("I want my own political funeral to be fierce and deviant," he had written before his death) and then walked the body in an open casket from Greenwich Village to George H.W. Bush's campaign headquarters and "indicted" Bush for murder the day before the 1992 presidential elections, even the police kept their distance in shock and maybe secret respect. Bush lost to Clinton the next day but was never charged with a crime. The crime of silence.

ACT UP soldiers were knights in tarnished armor fighting in "cum-smeared tanks," as John Rechy so touchingly and naively wrote in optimism years before the AIDS holocaust. Raiding a mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City to harass that asshole Cardinal John O'Connor, long an enemy of the gay community who had recently come out against safe-sex education in the schools, some gay radicals drew the line at one of the protesters who grabbed a communion wafer, broke it in half and threw it to the ground.

Not me! The Catholic Church is our enemy. They have bashed me, my culture and everything I believe in from the beginning of A.D., so I have no guilt about bashing them back right now. The anti-pope march that was held against Benedict XVI in London in September 2010 was a festive occasion that I luckily attended. *Such* a cool and cute crowd of pissed-off gay kids and sympathizers of all races and sexual preferences. A sense of humor united all. FUCK THE POPE signs could be expected, but I WOULDN'T FUCK THE POPE was even better. FUCK THE POPE BUT USE A CONDOM reflected a new spin on political correctness. Of course, child abuse by the clergy and the covering up of this brotherhood of pedophiles was endlessly spotlighted (ABSTINENCE MAKES THE CHURCH GROW FONDLERS), and even new theories were floated with wit (JESUS HAD TWO DADDIES; OPIUM IS BETTER THAN RELIGION). "Pope? Nope!" chants went out, and when a big dyke activist leader yelled to the crowd, "What do we want?" and the intelligent and unviolent crowd yelled back, "Rational thought!" I knew English restraint had reached a new level. Rational thought? Not exactly the fighting words of revolution, but what the hell, wit can be spoken softly. THE POPE WEARS A STUPID HAT said one decidedly unaggressive protester's sign. Could understatement be the new dangerous?

This new pope, Francis, the one everybody seems to love, is even worse, if you ask me. Anita Bryant did more for gay rights than this co-opting, faux-queer-friendly fraud ever did. At least Anita made us angry and inspired rebellion and fury against her stupid homophobia (which eventually ruined her career). But this new guy does nothing and pretends to be gay positive. Remember that song "Smiling Faces Sometimes" by the Temptations with the lyrics "Beware of the pat on the back. It just might hold you back"? This is Francis. "Good queer," he seems to reply when he utters, "Who am I to judge?" about gay marriage. Who are you? You're the fucking pope for Christ's sake, that's who you are!

He's even worse to women than he is to homos. The ban on ordaining female priests in the Catholic Church will "last forever," he recently announced. I guess his "Year of Mercy" is supposed to appease the weaker sex? Here he allows priests to forgive women who have had abortions—sort of like parking-ticket amnesty. He actually explained that these "expanded opportunities" would be under his order for "obtaining the indulgences." Indulgences? Is he kidding? Didn't indulgences go out with the Reformation? Again, he changes nothing. Abortion is still a "grave sin." Do all the unrepentant abortion gals join the unbaptized babies in limbo who are still waiting in total darkness for the privilege of seeing God, yet are now forgotten by the Church, which fairly recently announced that the very concept of limbo had been discontinued?

Pope Francis believes in miracles even though his most recent rushed canonization of Mother Teresa came under scrutiny when doctors and state health officials debunked the claim that her prayers had cured a woman of cancer. Her cyst, not cancer, had been treated for months at a government hospital and destroyed thanks to medicine, not some Catholic hocus-pocus.

How about a real miracle for Pope Francis? He becomes the first man to get pregnant and we give him a year of *no* mercy on deciding what women should do with their own bodies. Not until he's given birth to a female transgender Christ child of a different

color will we indulge him with a little queer mercy of our own.

I'm a big fan of the Satanic Temple. These pro-separation-between-church-and-state, antireligious advocates who believe in Satan as a "metaphorical construct" are the closest thing we have today to the Yippies. I'm not a real satanist, of course, especially after Anton LaVey and his Church of Satan made it so showbiz cheesy in the 1960s. To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't have a thing to wear to a goat sacrifice. But these new comic devil worshippers who have been billed as "First Amendment performance artists" who "offer tongue-in-cheek support to the fallen angel" know that the word *satanist* is a lightning rod for controversy that can be used for humorous activism. It's hard not to rise to their hilarious devilish bait.

I first heard of this group when they did one of their "pink masses" at the gravesite of homophobe Christian lunatic Fred Phelps's mother in Mississippi. A satanic graveside ritual performed after a religious enemy's death that turns the deceased once-hetero spirit gay seemed like a perfect new sacrament to me. The Satanic Temple also installed a "snaketivity" display next to the Christian Nativity scene that was set up at the Michigan state capitol. You could see the confused look of the children as they gazed back and forth between Beelzebub and baby Jesus. A child's right to choose is an important lesson in religious freedom we should all fight for.

When Bibles were allowed to be distributed in public schools in Florida, the Temple handed out a satanic coloring book to children in response. And in Oklahoma they unveiled plans to install right next to the Ten Commandments monument in the state capitol a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall bronze statue of Baphomet, the horned and hooved totem of contemporary satanism, sitting on a throne while two sculpted innocent children look up to him in wonderment. When the Oklahoma State Supreme Court ordered the Ten Commandments removed, the Satanic Temple scrapped the plan and moved the devil statue to its Detroit branch, where a local pastor complained the ceremony was "a welcome-home party for evil." It now rests unpeacefully in the Satanic Temple's headquarters in...where else? Salem, Massachusetts.

Doug Mesner, a.k.a. Lucien Greaves, co-founder and spokesperson for the church, is charismatic in a demonic way. Yes, he wears all black and inverted-cross accessories, but what clinches his aura is a disfigured, scarred eye that never moves in its socket, which gives him a signature look that is at first unnerving and then just plain devilishly sexy. He's a troublemaker in the tradition of Abbie Hoffman but still a serious fighter for freedom *from* religion, and he's a staunch opponent of doctors who believe in "dissociative identity disorder," also known as multiple personality syndrome, which resulted in the Satanic Panic that swept our country and imprisoned many innocent day-care workers following the McMartin school child-molestation hysteria. (They were innocent, just in case you forgot.) Lucien crashes psychiatric conventions and confronts publicly the doctors who still believe in such nonsense. You should join him. Send money. Spread the word before they commit *you!*

• • •

It's time to go beyond the valley of the Red Army Faction, over the top of the Venceremos Brigade and beneath the valley of the Jewish Defense League to create a whole new brand of capitalist activism. One that uses a completely original positive form of comic terrorism to humiliate and embarrass our political and moral enemies. We can be rich, poor or the ever-vanishing in-between, but we need to regroup, conspire and attack with razor-sharp precision. College students, stop studying! High school kids have already walked out and made you look like slackers in the rebellion department. Get your lazy overeducated asses out in the streets where you belong. There's no such thing as "undecided" anymore. This time, unlike the 1960s, we're gonna win.

Don't act up, ACT BAD! No matter what your sexual preference is, pretend you haven't gotten laid in six months and use that horny drive for release in a political way. Join our little coup d'état and get out there and cause unrest no matter who's running the show. Outside agitation *is* the fountain of youth. Let it flow. ■

Opening page: *John Waters in 1998 on the set of Pecker, which he calls his "nice" movie. "It got made," he says, "mainly because Japanese teenage girls loved Edward Furlong and he had agreed to star in the title role."* ***Right:*** *Waters with Divine in New York, attending the 1975 premiere of Female Trouble, the second film of his so-called trash trilogy. Star of that dark comedy and several other underground Waters films, Divine is best known as the filth-loving Babs Johnson in Pink Flamingos.*

HOT TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

CAN'T WAIT TO POST ABOUT THE LATEST TRENDING TOPIC WITHOUT CONSIDERING BOTH SIDES? I'M RIGHT THERE WITH YOU

BY **APARNA NANCHERLA**

WHEN I AGREED TO WRITE A HOT TAKE ON hot takes, my first thought was *Damn, Daniel, back at it again with the meta plans!* (My brain is now essentially a series of doctored memes.) Next, I went to the dictionary to figure out what exactly I had agreed to. *Merriam-Webster* describes a hot take as "a published reaction or analysis of a recent news event that, often because of its time-sensitive nature, doesn't offer much in the way of deep reflection." Lacks deep reflection? Perfect. Very on-brand for humanity's current iteration.

Let me back up, though. You should know my credentials. I'm well-versed in strong opinions. I've been a stand-up comedian for the past decade-plus. By its very nature, stand-up is all about hot takes. You're onstage, your voice authoritatively amplified, and, usually in a stylized or performative way, you're expounding on theories such as why religion and gay rights are not mutually exclusive, or pointing out some otherwise unquestioned absurdity in life. Like, when will the world be ready for "Mambo No. 6"? (Answer: Anytime—but more Monica this round, please.)

Even the most abstract version of comedy has a point of view (which is just a fancy way of saying opinion). If people are laughing, they don't necessarily care if they don't agree with what you're saying. In fact, the standard response to stand-up is a series of equally strong opinions, as some of the audience will think you were "funny" and others, mostly on YouTube, will tell you to "kill yourself."

By virtue of my profession, then, I'm going on record as pro–hot take. And like many comedians, I spend a lot of time on Twitter—the land of hot takes, as opposed to the opposite, which you might call freezing nonsense. Everyone with the gumption to start an account, which we now know doesn't even require sentience, can dissent and polemicize to their heart's (or algorithm's) content.

Within free social-media platforms, the hot take is hand-clap emoji, 100 percent emoji, fire emoji. But woe unto the content creator who missteps. Most people—celebrities or not—are one tweet or viral moment away from being "canceled." The outrage pendulum swings all kinds of ways.

The positive end of this is accountability movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. The more cautionary trajectory is expecting the same rigid good-versus-evil paradigms that often marginalize groups in the first place, painting their members as complete heroes or villains, forgetting that nearly all humans are a mix of both. It's scary to admit, but we all make mistakes. No one has a perfect take on everything, and nuance is crucial to understanding even those we perceive to be already on our side. (Oops, I'm veering into deep reflection now, and that's the opposite of clickbait—it's click wait.)

Like hot takes, stand-up comedy can be reductive. You have to sacrifice gray areas for the simplicity of the joke. If you include every point of view, you dilute the punch line. That's not to say those views shouldn't be voiced—in fact, giving voice to nuance is often how progress happens. But it's also the reason hot takes can't account for everyone and everything.

In fact, in this very piece, by trying to acknowledge multiple angles of the *what* and *why* and *how* of hot takes, I essentially milked mine down to a tepid pudding. But perhaps that's why we find hot takes so comforting: They're decisive in a way the adult world often isn't. But beyond all the absolutes, it's nice to remember that many of us are trying our best. Tepid or not, that's worth at least a pudding, if not more. (And if you freeze the rest of that pudding? Pudding pops!) ■

STYLING BY JENNY HAAPALA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS SCHOONOVER**

NO COMMENT

HE WANTS EVERYONE'S VOICE TO BE HEARD—AS LONG AS IT'S NOT UNDERNEATH EPISODES OF HIS TV SHOWS

BY **ADAM PALLY**

LEFT: BLOUSE BY FRAME DENIM; RIGHT: SHIRT BY OUR LEGACY

HERE'S A HOT TAKE ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH: I don't believe it should be legal to post comments on the same web page as the content—and please don't @ me* for this. Who am I? I'm film, television and now YouTube personality Adam Pally. I've been in many of your favorite movies and on TV shows that haven't been successes.

One year, I starred in a movie with dogs that finished in last place at the box office on the same day two separate networks canceled the two TV shows I was on (I'm exaggerating, though some days it does feel that way). Needless to say, internet comments have been part of my life and career since I started in comedy, all the iPhones ago.

I can honestly say I have never read one online comment that changed my life for the better. Do I appreciate the compliments? Sure, but as is human nature, the negative ones drown out the positive ones. Am I a big Hollywood snowflake baby? Probably. But what I'm asking is, Why are we so excited to hurt each other in the most visible place possible, just because we can?

I'm not saying it should be illegal for us to express our opinions on the internet. I do it regularly—on Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, subreddit, subreddit of subreddit. But I wouldn't do it underneath someone's content, because I'm not gonna talk shit to your face. I'm gonna talk shit behind your back, when I think there will be no consequences for you or for me. You know, like a normal human being.

It truly makes America special that people from all walks of life can voice how they feel in private or in public. As an artist—yes, I am wearing a scarf as I write this—I would never challenge anyone's right to speak his or her mind. But if you want to comment about a video, do it on another page. I'm simply asking for a separation between the media and the opinions of the public via one small fucking link.

A comment is different from a review or an opinion. A comment is a bother. Our thoughts on what we're experiencing shouldn't be directly associated with the experience's success or failure. And I see you getting ready to @ me* underneath the online version of this article, but if you do, PLAYBOY will put the comments on another page. (I probably should have checked with PLAYBOY first before assuming they would put these comments on another page.)

Imagine online commenting in the real world. In no way, shape or form would the Louvre let me walk in wearing a mask, tell everyone my name is baesaprocky349 and scream in front of the *Mona Lisa* that she's not all that—that, actually, she's *not* looking at me from every angle. I'd be taken out quicker than some of my shows have been taken off television. Am I saying my new show, *Champaign ILL,* on YouTube Premium, is the *Mona Lisa*? I sure am. I can say whatever I want; this is my article.

Internet comments are dangerous, and they've been hit with restrictions due to sexual harassment, racism and anti-Semitic and homophobic trolling. So please stand behind me for commonsense internet-commenting laws. I realize this doesn't appeal to everybody, which is why I'm trying to convince you by calling them *common sense*.

Speaking of trolling, I have no stats to back this up, but I am positive Russian bots are doctoring *Happy Endings*'s Hulu viewership. There's no way we're that low.

That reminds me: While I have your attention, please watch *Champaign ILL* on YouTube Premium. And now that I think about it, feel free to leave a comment. I'm nothing if not a man of no convictions. ■

**I'm still not entirely sure what "don't @ me" means.*

PLAYBOY'S PARTY JOKES

IN HONOR OF OUR 65TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR AND THIS ISSUE'S THEME, WE PRESENT AN AMUSING ASSORTMENT, PULLED FROM THE ARCHIVES, ON THE VAGARIES OF SPEECH

HAVING just been criticized in a party conclave, the politician wryly told newsmen, "I've just learned the difference between a cactus and a caucus."

"What's that, Senator?" he was asked.

"In the case of a cactus," he retorted, "all the pricks are on the outside."

OUR Unabashed Dictionary defines *censor* as a person who sticks his no's into other people's business.

THE editor of a small weekly newspaper, in a rage over several congressional bills that had recently been passed, ran a scathing editorial under the headline HALF OUR LEGISLATORS ARE CROOKS. Many prominent local politicians were incensed, and tremendous pressure was exerted on him to retract the statement. He finally succumbed to the pressure and ran an apology with the headline HALF OUR LEGISLATORS ARE NOT CROOKS.

A woman visited her doctor for her annual exam. The doctor asked, "Are you and your husband sexually active?"

"Yes," the woman said. "We have verbal sex every day."

"Verbal sex? I think you mean oral sex," the doctor said.

"I mean verbal sex," the woman said. "Every morning my husband and I pass each other in the hall and say, 'Fuck you!' "

GRAFITTO spotted on a tavern wall: THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH (IF THAT'S OKAY WITH THE REST OF YOU).

AT a recent Georgetown reception for a retiring diplomat, two State Department underlings struggled with small talk. Finally, one asked the other, "Tell me, Harry, what do you consider the two most interesting topics of conversation nowadays?"

"Sex and politics, I guess," Harry replied.

"I agree with you there," said the first, nodding. "What about the second topic?"

THE young reporter was interviewing a woman who had just reached her 100th birthday.

"To what do you attribute your remarkable good health?" he asked.

"Well," she replied, "I've always eaten moderately, worked hard, I don't smoke or drink, and I keep good hours."

"Have you ever been bedridden?" the reporter asked.

"Well, yes," said the elderly lady, "but don't put that in your paper."

AMERICANS are people who insist on living in the present, tense.

AN underground newspaper suggested recently that the marijuana question could easily be settled by a joint session of Congress.

THE attorney was briefing Mrs. Harris before calling her to testify. "You must swear to tell the truth," the lawyer warned. "Do you understand?"

"Yes. I'm to swear to tell the truth."

"Have you any idea what will happen if you don't tell the truth?" he asked.

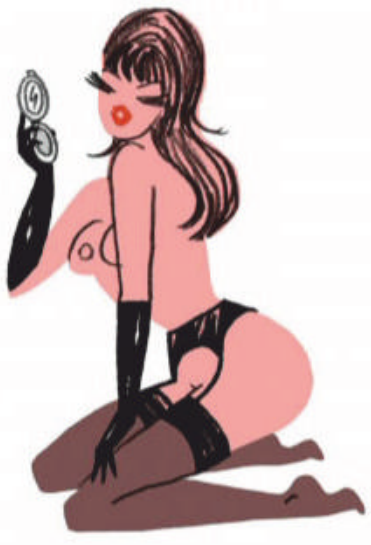
"I expect," she replied, "our side will win."

CERTAINLY, America has its problems," the pompous politician roared. "But we're still the only people in the world who are free to criticize our courts, our Congress and our president."

"That's what you think," the foreign diplomat retorted. "People all over the world are criticizing your courts, your Congress and your president."

OUR Unabashed Dictionary goes on to define *sex survey* as "a sermon on the mount."

SIGN at the entrance of a nudist colony: PLEASE BARE WITH US.



"This is Jake. He's not politically correct or even generally correct."

FANS HAVE BEEN AWAITING HER NEXT ALBUM FOR THREE YEARS. CAN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY'S MOST FEARLESS (AND GENRE-DEFYING) ARTIST FINALLY BREAK THROUGH?

BY
EVE BARLOW

lizzo

the INCOMPARABLE

STYLING BY JASON REMBERT; LEFT: LACE BODYSUIT BY YANDY, FEATHER BOA FROM NY VINTAGE, TIGHTS BY YANDY, RING AND EARRINGS BY HOUSE OF EMMANUELE; RIGHT: BODYSUIT BY YANDY, ROBE BY NONYE B, TIGHTS BY YANDY, NECKLACE FROM NY VINTAGE

LIZZO TOTTERS INTO THE KITCHEN, FLASHES OF HER legs peeking through fishnets, her silhouette wrapped in a bodice. The artist begins to improvise her way out of her stilettos with a riff on the Weeknd's "Can't Feel My Face."

"I can't feel my feet when I'm in *shoes,*" she coos. "But I love it."

An order of pad thai arrives promptly at six P.M. She has been on set at this 1970s-Barbie-themed Hollywood apartment since this morning, and she hasn't eaten all day. "I'm happiest when I'm working or eating," she says with a laugh that sounds like nothing less than a celebration of life. "Sometimes I can work and eat, like right now. That's when I'm real happy. Ha!"

Happiness isn't what Lizzo is serving; Lizzo serves positivity. Positivity is an outlook—it's something you have to actively practice. Sometimes positivity results in happiness. Yesterday Lizzo wasn't happy. On Twitter she was subtweeting someone who had upset her ("You a LYIN ASS NIGGA… IM SICK AND TIRED OF BEING TOLD YA BUM ASS FAIRYTALES"). She calls her online presence a "body-positive persona." *Persona*. That's key. Her music matches that persona. Her most-streamed song, "Good As Hell," is a petition to women to prioritize themselves in relationships: "If he don't love you anymore / Just walk your fine ass out the door."

Lizzo wears her moods publicly to counteract the false narrative that being "positive" means surfing a perpetual high. "I found when I'd meet people at shows they'd be like, 'Yo, are you always so happy?' And I'd be like, 'Why people be asking me that?' " she says, waving her lacquered talons. "If I'm only showing the most positive moments, there's nothing to root for." But, she warns, "I don't think everybody should do it. That's not their commerce. Keep taking pictures of your cat. You don't have to do the heavy lifting."

It's strange, the emotional intimacy we share online. I tell Lizzo this, and she nods. She knows that our culture of detachment creates opportunities for openness and likens her online relationships to a therapist-patient dynamic. Leaning on friends and family is harder. Your problems become their problems. "Social media cuts that mess out," she says. "I don't know how to describe it yet. This is new to all of us." You could say Lizzo is part of a vanguard that's forging a more symbiotic, empathetic purpose for social media, an increasing consciousness of what we say and how we choose to say it. The internet is real

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ADRIENNE RAQUEL**

life now; even without "that mess," cyber relationships go deep. "It's not Myspace and LiveJournal anymore, bro," Lizzo says.

The internet can't address physical solitude, though. "I've been extremely sad," she says. Lizzo, 30, has spoken previously about her lowest point: She was 21 when her father died, and soon after she experienced homelessness. "When I'm really sad I have no perspective," she says. " 'This is the end! Nobody cares!' Having perspective is my remedy. I'm gonna have the opportunity to experience the opposite of this. What is the opposite of being lied to? Trust. So I meditate on trust. That's hard to do, though, sis. I don't wallow into the future or the past like I did. I ask, 'What am I feeling right now?' "

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Melissa Jefferson was born in Detroit and performed in her first marching band in the eighth grade. She learned to rap in high school, coming to hip-hop late; her childhood was spent in church. She co-founded the all-women ensembles the Chalice and GRRRL PRTY and studied applied music at the University of Houston. In 2011, after her father's death, she moved to Minneapolis. There she struck up creative partnerships with Prince and, separately, producer Lazerbeak, with whom she produced her 2013 debut, *Lizzobangers,* on a shoestring budget. Her reputation continued to build with the 2016 EP *Coconut Oil,* and by 2018 she was touring with Florence and the Machine and Haim, guest judging on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and appearing on the digital cover of *Teen Vogue*.

Last October she posted a video of herself playing the flute at a show—an instrumental interlude in her then unreleased song "Bye Bitch." Thirteen seconds in, flanked by two backup dancers, she breaks into a choreographed routine, her left leg kicking forward in rapid fire, her arms pumping. The audience erupts. She takes her flute to the mike once again before delivering the song's final lyric: "Bitch, you emotional!" Lizzo captioned the video "HAVE U EVER SEEN A BITCH PLAY FLUTE THEN HIT THE SHOOT?!" It has gained more than 5 million views and motivated her to release "Bye Bitch" on SoundCloud; *Rolling Stone* short-listed it as a "song you need to know," writing that it "barely scrapes the surface of what Lizzo is capable of as an artist."

Lizzo came to southern California "by osmosis" about three years ago. MTV paid for her relocation as part of a deal for her to co-host *Wonderland,* a short-lived live-performance show. "I never said I'd move to L.A.," she says. She doesn't dislike Los Angeles. "Of course, I don't like traffic or fault lines," she says, laughing. She doesn't party either, because Lizzo considers celebrity a choice. "I don't do famous-people stuff. Fame is a lifestyle. I'm not a famous person, so I don't live that lifestyle." For now, she goes only where she's needed: online and to venues. "Bitch, I'm not gonna go where I ain't invited," she says. "It could be Jesus's 35th birthday party at the 40/40 Club with Jay-Z and Beyoncé turning water into wine. If my name isn't on that list and those people don't have an emotional connection to me, I don't give a fuck."

But social media attracts a lot of phonies too. Does it ever get to be too much? "You better believe I'm gonna take me a break once I'm not needed. I don't like looking at my phone all day. Phones burn my fingertips. Look! Look at this burn on the tip of my finger!" She puts her finger in front of my nose. There is indeed a small patch of hardened skin. ("You so cute," she says with a giggle. "Your eyes crossed.")

It's not enough for pop to be entertaining in 2019. Having an A-list producer no longer guarantees artists a *Billboard* top 10. An artist needs to say something. Luckily, Lizzo has always had something to say. In 2013 she independently released the music video for "Batches & Cookies." In one scene, she rubs down a topless man with butter. In another, she stands outside government buildings in the Midwest with her sidekick, who is waving a rainbow flag. This was nearly two years before the Supreme Court decided *Obergefell v. Hodges* and half a decade before the creation of #20gayteen, an online LGBTQ movement launched by rising pop star Hayley Kiyoko that encourages queer people to fight back against repression.

When it comes to body positivity, she was an advocate before Lane Bryant turned the movement into a marketing campaign, before *Project Runway* began to feature plus-size models and before Sony's brief casting of Amy Schumer as Barbie. Her song "En Love" was released in 2015. "I'd never heard anybody say that before, so I thought, I'ma say it. I needed to hear it," she recalls. "People at shows would be so shocked when I'd sing 'I'm in love with myself.' " But Lizzo isn't angry that corporations capitalize on change. She argues that Beyoncé's use of the word *feminist* brought awareness to a new generation. "The important thing is making sure this shit don't become a trend. We gotta be undeniable. We gotta fix ourselves in the culture so that we're unshakable. Body positivity has to be mainstream."

Lizzo also uses her position to promote diversity. Today, she gets riled up talking about gender politics. "The way we talk about gender has to change," she says. "Gender doesn't really exist. We created social gender, so we gotta destigmatize it, take the importance off of skirt versus pants. That's not even real, dog. What are you fucking talking about? 'This is a boys' club.'

"THE IMPORTANT THING IS MAKING SURE THIS SHIT DON'T BECOME A TREND. WE GOTTA FIX OURSELVES IN THE CULTURE."

FROM TOP: FUR COAT BY ADRIENNE LANDAU, LINGERIE BY CURVE MUSE, NECKLACE FROM NY VINTAGE; LINGERIE AND TIGHTS BY YANDY, JEWELRY BY HOUSE OF EMMANUELE; LACE BODYSUIT AND TIGHTS BY YANDY, FEATHER BOA FROM NY VINTAGE, JEWELRY FROM NY VINTAGE, TIGHTS BY WOLFORD, SHOES FROM NY VINTAGE; FUR COAT BY ADRIENNE LANDAU, JEWELRY BY HOUSE OF EMMANUELE

Get your dumb ass outta here. This is a girls' club, ho. Shut up."

All of this manifests itself in her music. "Scuse Me" from *Coconut Oil* is a letter of self-love. "I don't need a crown to know that I'm a queen," she sings. That became her slogan. Last year's "Boys" was a Prince-like number with a "SexyBack"-type motif. Just as Lizzo is free of shackles, her music defies genre. It mimics her story of outsiderdom. She wants her audiences to act regal—to feel entitled to do whatever the hell they want. "It's impossible for me to do what anybody else does. I tried and it wasn't good," she says.

Her forthcoming album, *Cuz I Love You,* out April 19, has been in the making for three years. She refuses to reveal anything about the project except that she's producing it with Ricky Reed, her collaborator since 2015. "This album is where Lizzo comes into her own not only as vocalist but as producer, arranger, overall visionary," Reed says. "We would have sessions where we wouldn't even record anything. We would just sit down together with the productions and try different instruments, arrangements, forms. There is not one split second of this album not touched by her."

"My individuality is a gift, but it's my biggest creative obstacle," Lizzo says. "I can do everything. I wanna do everything. I can rap fast, sing big, say things people never said before." Her character voices are comical and powerful; she laces rhymes with intellect and oddities. Rapping was her break, but it was also a mask. Reed helped her find her voice. "I could freestyle sing over any trap song. That's safe, that's easy. But what happens when I really unleash what I wanna say? I've learned not to be afraid of who I am." This album, it seems, will center around singing, not raps and jibes. "I thought, Yo, what would Aretha Franklin's rap record sound like in 2019?" she says, deadpan. "She didn't hold back. She was a G."

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The driving force behind Lizzo's compulsion as a truth-sayer is a spiritual one. She senses emotional turmoil around her. Star signs and charts are fixtures in her day. "I've always felt the whole world, you know?" she says. "I don't think I'd be able to write songs if I wasn't an empath." Recently something's been up. "These last couple weeks, sis?" She pretends to wipe sweat off her brow on this lukewarm December day. "Woo! They've been crazy. It's universal—when you look at the news and the news looks like how you feel; when you listen to music and it sounds like how you feel. Everybody's having similar illnesses."

She references Michael Cohen, President Trump's former attorney. "He said that Donald Trump led him from the light to darkness." Lizzo has always been a fan of the adage "It's darkest before dawn," but now she has a different read on it. "When you're in the moment, when it's dark, it's gonna get darker, but it's always gonna get light. Right now, it's dark until we snap and it'll lead us to the light." The lightness is coming in early 2019, according to her own clairvoyance, and perhaps not coincidentally, so is her new album. "Maybe that's why it took so long," she says. "We needed all this shit to want some medicine."

Lizzo may be what the music world needs, even if the industry has yet to signal the wide embrace she deserves. Until then, she counts her blessings. Today is one of them. "This is a literal dream," she says, looking around at her PLAYBOY shoot. "I watch movies about influential people's lives—things they've done, boundaries they break. When you are yourself, you don't realize the impact you have. Sometimes I be forgetting the impact I can have. This is one of those moments that remind me."

STRIPPERS

= WORKERS

BY **JESSICA P. OGILVIE**

Even as they entertain you from the catwalk and champagne room, America's erotic dancers face a shameful array of workplace malfeasance; here, we go inside a growing and long overdue labor movement

Gizelle Marie was on her way home to New York City after working a shift at the Stadium Club, a Washington, D.C. establishment whose website promises "the most talented exotic entertainment in the industry." It was October 2017, and the 29-year-old dancer was flush with cash.

But as the black car she'd hired whisked her homeward, Marie's satisfaction turned to frustration. Scrolling through the social media feeds of other strippers, she saw, over and over, their complaints about club practices that prevent dancers from earning the kind of money she'd just made—specifically, the growing ranks of female bartenders who wear revealing clothing, dance provocatively and sometimes literally stand between strippers and their tips. With online followings that can hit six figures, these so-called "startenders" are a reliable draw for customers and an easy distraction from the women working onstage.

In a moment of exasperation, Marie typed up her feelings and posted them to Instagram: "I'm so sick of seeing my fellow dancers in New York complain about deserving what is supposed to be theirs. Me nor any dancer should have to leave the comfort of their own home/city to make a fucking check."

For the next few days, Marie kept posting about the problem using the hashtag #NYCStripperStrike. By the end of the week, she was trending. Local and national media picked up the story, and Marie gained tens of thousands of followers. Over the next few months, she and other dancers joined larger protests, holding signs with slogans like OUR BODIES, OUR MINDS, OUR POWER; TWERK IS WORK; and STIGMA DRIVES VIOLENCE at the Women's March on Central Park West and the International Women's Strike in Washington Square Park.

While startenders were her impetus, Marie had other, broader concerns as well. Across the U.S., strippers' rights are routinely and flagrantly infringed, with violations ranging from wage theft and employee misclassification to racial discrimination and sexual harassment. And according to many of the strippers we spoke with, few people inside or outside the clubs seem to care.

"There is this treatment of strippers by people who run the joints that we don't matter and that we are replaceable," says Jacqueline Frances, a New York–based dancer, comedian and activist. "There is a really profound disrespect for strippers by management—by everyone."

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Stripping is legal sex work in America, but states and counties have the right to regulate strip clubs—and many do, often quite spiritedly. Municipalities from San Diego to Tampa enforce a so-called six-feet rule, for example, which stipulates that dancers must stay two yards away from patrons. Others impose regulations regarding how much nipple or areola women can reveal, how much underboob or underbutt or—in New York, for instance—what percentage of a club's square footage can be dedicated to adult entertainment. But even as they legislate dancers' movements and clothing down to fractions of an inch, lawmakers tend to ignore the fact that those same workers' rights are being roundly disregarded.

Among the industry's biggest problems is the corrupt and byzantine way money flows within its ranks. To begin with, strippers are typically classified as independent contractors rather than employees. This means they should be able to come and go as they please, charge whatever they choose to charge and dress as they see fit. Instead, many dancers describe being assigned shifts, told what to charge and held accountable for keeping certain hours. Such regulations should qualify them as employees of the club rather than independent contractors paying for the privilege of working there. But strippers are frequently denied the legal protection afforded W-2 employees, including payroll taxes, health care and workers' rights protections.

"Club owners want the benefits of you being an independent contractor, but they're treating you like an employee," says Logan Dee, co-leader of We Are Dancers USA, an organization that advocates for strippers' rights. "You are getting the crap end of both sticks."

Susan Crumiller, a New York–based attorney who works with #NYCStripperStrike, says that such misclassifications are a way for club owners to save money by cheating dancers and the Internal Revenue Service alike.

"It's ultimately tax avoidance, and it's also labor-law avoidance," she says. "You're basically falsely claiming that you don't need to treat them in all the ways we have decided an employer must treat an employee."

Dee adds that the lump sums strippers are often required to hand over to clubs every night—"house fees," in stripper parlance—aren't subject to any oversight, meaning clubs can charge dancers as much as they want.

"I have to pay to work," she says. "It's like a hairdresser, where you rent out a space. In theory, it sounds great—like I'm paying for their space, and whatever I make, I take home. But the fees are not regulated, and they can be astronomical."

In the New York City clubs where Gizelle Marie has worked, including Starlets NYC and Club Angels NYC in Queens, and Club Lust in Brooklyn, house fees varied by hundreds of dollars, she says. (Management at all three establishments either did not respond to or declined requests for comment.)

"On slower nights it could be $60 to $100," Marie says. "If it was a big event, it could be $150 to $300."

In addition to house fees, strippers often hand over a percentage of revenue from lap dances and VIP rooms, as well as a percentage of their stage tips. They're expected to tip other staffers, including DJs, bartenders, house mothers, security workers and sometimes management, and some clubs charge extra fees for being late, missing shifts or other alleged infractions.

Case in point: Comfort Alabama Carter has worked with just such clubs. The 22-year-old has dewy porcelain skin and sleepy hazel eyes, a tattoo of a scorpion on her left hand and more than a dozen others embellishing the rest of her body. She loves dancing, she says. "The only thing that makes me not like working at these clubs is having my money taken from me."

At many clubs, Carter explains, management asks for money from dancers with virtually no rhyme or reason. Such payments are calculated at varying rates depending on a tangle of factors: what time women arrive at work, how many lap dances they sell, which manager happens to be working that day, whether it's a weeknight or a weekend. Some dancers are subjected to a 60-40 split when it comes to the money they make from lap dances—the house takes 40 percent, and the dancer takes 60—but that rate can change on a whim.

According to Manuel*, who has worked on and off for 10 years as a strip-club manager and DJ in Los Angeles, the mandate to collect house fees and portions of lap dance fees comes from the top. ("Manuel" and other names marked with an asterisk have been changed.) That means managers, who are more likely to

ILLUSTRATION BY **QUENTIN MONGE**

interact with dancers on a daily basis, don't necessarily have any say over how much they charge, at least up front.

"Clubs have a chain of command," he says. "Some clubs have everything from a vice president to a president to district and regional managers. It's always up to the owner or the people up the chain of command."

Adding to the confusion, says Valerie Stunning, a Las Vegas–based stripper and online activist, is the unspoken rule that dancers who tip bouncers and VIP-room hosts at a higher percentage will be given access to higher-paying customers.

"A lot of the VIP hosts and managers—mostly it happens in the bigger, corporate clubs—orchestrate these rings of girls who are giving them extraordinary amounts of the money they earn in exchange for introductions to the high-paying clients, so the rest of us don't really ever have access to them," she says.

Stunning says she learned this the hard way at one of the first Vegas clubs in which she worked. One night, as she walked across the floor to approach a customer who was sitting by himself in a remote part of the club, two bouncers walked in front of her, stood side-by-side and prevented her from going any farther.

"They were all ex–UFC fighters; they were massive," she says. "They literally stepped toward the center of the entry point to physically block me from entering because I wasn't one of the girls they worked with."

The experience has led Stunning to make a grim comparison. "It's my opinion," she says, "that this kind of behavior is just another form of pimping."

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For women of color, things are even worse. Clubs that are considered upscale often hire lighter-skinned and white women almost exclusively, and at clubs in lower-income neighborhoods or predominantly black or Latino areas—referred to by several women we interviewed as "urban" clubs—darker-skinned women must abide by different rules than their lighter-skinned colleagues.

Chanel*, who has worked on #NYCStripperStrike with Marie, says she was a victim of blatant colorism in several locations.

"I wouldn't be allowed in VIP rooms when certain people would be in there, I would have to pay different house fees than other girls, or I would have to get dressed and get hair and makeup in a different area than other girls," she says. "I wasn't able to work on certain nights. I would be basically just overlooked and overshadowed, and I would rarely receive the recognition that was reserved for being a hard worker."

Siobhan Brooks is chair of the African-American studies department at California State University at Fullerton and author of *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*. She notes that discrimination against women of color—and particularly darker-skinned women of color—is both rampant and familiar in the industry.

"That is a very common grievance, and it is also very old," she says. "Darker-skinned black women are restricted from those lucrative positions. They're usually put on shifts where you won't make a lot of money, and they have a harder time asking for money. They're haggled down more; there will be more resistance to giving her what she is worth."

Because of where so-called urban clubs are located, Brooks says, they become wrapped into the bigger picture of neighborhoods that are underserviced across the board.

"Urban clubs mirror any inner city's lack of resources," she says. "You have housing projects located in those areas. You may not have banks; you may have check-cashing places that surround those types of clubs, as well as underfunded schools, dilapidated buildings, over- or underpolicing." Results include "less investment in the dancer," which in turn can attract customers who "feel like they can get away with rape."

Gizelle Marie. PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SASHA MASLOV**

And when it comes to women of color getting hired at so-called upscale clubs, discrimination thrives as well. Those businesses may have unspoken quotas regarding how many women of color they hire, or they may bring on only lighter-skinned dancers. All of these factors can ultimately correlate with the way women are treated once they arrive at work.

"There's more of a stigma in the urban clubs that women are less educated and you can take advantage of them," says Brooks. "In the upscale clubs, you have your Julia Roberts stereotype—that they're educated and this is a stepping stone."

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Although women of color undoubtedly have it harder in this environment, dancers of all races are at heightened risk of sexual harassment and assault. Exact statistics on how frequently exotic dancers experience such violations are difficult to come by, as no governing body tracks complaints or accusations. But women report being groped by customers and managers alike, and even by police.

In those instances, says Dee, strippers have nowhere to turn.

"If you get raped at work, what are you going to do—file with human resources?" she says. "Call the cops? You think the club is going to let those cops in? And even if they do, they're just going to tell you, 'What did you think? You're a stripper. Strippers can't be raped.' "

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Onstage at Dames N' Games, a topless club in a desolate corner of downtown Los Angeles, blue and red spotlights shine onto the stage as a sinewy woman in a pink schoolgirl skirt pretzels

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“IF YOU GET RAPED AT WORK, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO—FILE WITH HUMAN RESOURCES?”

herself around a brass pole. The strains of Marilyn Manson’s “This Is Halloween” blare through the speakers, and by the time the song is over, she has peeled off her black bralette and is undulating her hips in front of four men who sit captivated at the tip rail, tossing money.

On the main floor, half a dozen other women circulate, sipping drinks and draping themselves over customers, whispering to one another or stretching their legs against the walls. Among them is a young woman with glossy chestnut hair, dressed in a one-piece bodysuit whose back consists of little more than a string. Sasha* sits down with me at a high bar table, a pint of beer in front of her, and explains that she’s been working here for a year and likes it because it’s “more transparent” than other places she’s worked.

The payout system at Dames N’ Games (part of the Spearmint Rhino empire, one of the largest chains of gentlemen’s clubs in the country), she says, amounts to management taking $3 or $4 out of every $20 she makes on lap dances, depending on whether one or two managers are working that evening. That means $100 VIP-room dances cost her $15 to $20; $300 VIP-room dances cost $45 or $60; and so forth.

Sasha works there as an independent contractor, so she runs up against many of the same issues as Carter, Marie and Dee. For the most part, dancers’ attempts to fight the system haven’t gained much traction, even when they file lawsuits like the one brought against Spearmint Rhino in 2012. (PLAYBOY reached out to Spearmint Rhino Consulting Worldwide, Inc., which owns Spearmint Rhino, for comment; a press relations representative referred us to the contact form on the club’s website.) That’s not surprising, says Stunning. Other, similar lawsuits, typically brought by dancers who believe their wages have been illegally garnished, have unfolded throughout the country. But little changes in their wake.

“In eight years of stripping, I’ve received at least five different notices that are like, ‘So-and-so are filing a lawsuit,’ ” she says. “The club settles the suit and makes a few amendments in the paperwork we sign when we get hired, and then things continue.”

A raft of workplace dysfunctions contribute to the problem, some of which workers from more vanilla industries would recognize. Susan Minato, co-president of the labor union Unite Here Local 11, points out that complaining about customers goes against service providers’ very job description.

“In hospitality, the idea is the [service provider] is there to make the guest feel good, to entertain you and to serve you,” she says. “If something goes wrong, complaining about a guest puts them in a very awkward situation.”

But Crumiller believes a big reason such legal efforts haven’t resulted in real change is that the culture at large, while it may treat others in the service industry with at least rote courtesy, is decidedly not on the side of strippers.

“Dancers are a very marginalized group,” says Crumiller. “They are very vulnerable, and part of it is because, as a society, we don’t really care about these women.”

Stunning adds that women in this line of work often don’t acknowledge the validity of their jobs even to themselves, internalizing the message that their work has no value.

“A lot of the women who do this job, even if they’re not ashamed of it, are holding out, waiting to go work a ‘real job,’ or whatever,” she says. “They don’t believe anyone is on their side if their rights are being violated.”

This is where Gizelle Marie and her allies come in.

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When Marie began organizing #NYCStripperStrike, her work became part of a growing number of endeavors—on social media, in private community meetings and even in courtrooms across the country—spearheaded by strippers who are done being treated as though they have no standing under the law. Today, there are glimmers of hope that their efforts will pay off.

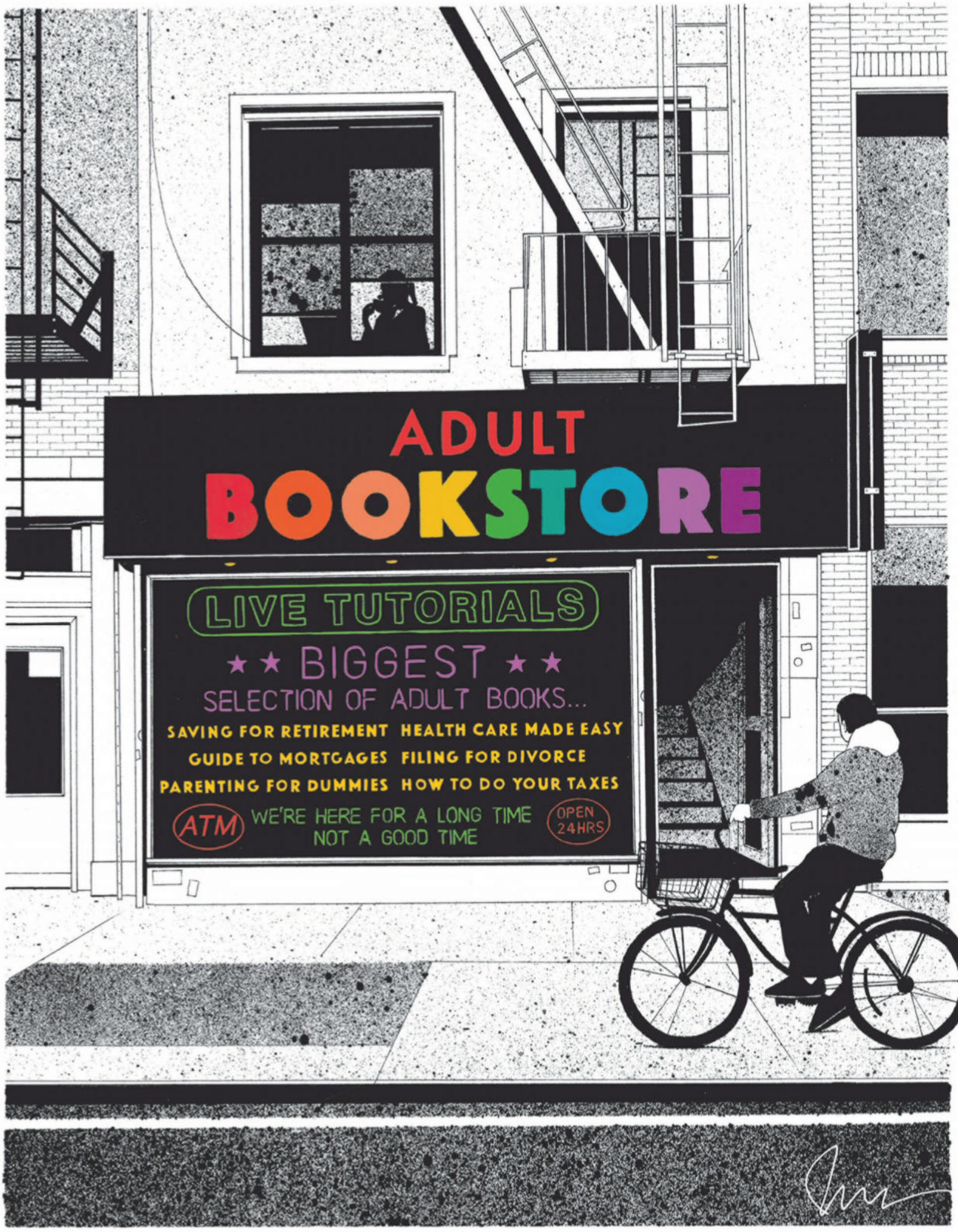
As of August 2018, Marie and another woman working as a stripper in New York City have filed three different complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The complaints address issues of sexual harassment and discrimination and could lead to lawsuits. In California, a State Supreme Court decision in April 2018 made it more difficult for businesses to classify workers as independent contractors, which some strippers believe could affect their classification in clubs. Many strippers were galvanized by the April 2018 passage of the U.S. House and Senate bills known as FOSTA-SESTA (the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act), which cracked down on what sex workers can and cannot say online—a move many such workers felt ultimately placed them in harm’s way. And then there was Instagram’s sudden decision in May 2018 to censor any posts with the hashtag #stripper or #strippers.

To Antonia Crane, a Los Angeles–based writer and stripper, this is a rallying point. Part of the first and only stripper union created in San Francisco in the late 1990s, Crane says the efforts she sees among the stripper community now—along with the recent political events—have created a growing movement unlike anything she’s seen before.

“It’s a really crucial time,” she says. “We need to do a lot, and it’s important that we do it right now.”

A year and a half after her initial Instagram post, Marie is traveling the country to meet other women (and spend time away from an environment in New York City that she felt had become toxic). She has been spreading the word, building bridges and joining forces with other strippers. If she succeeds—if the women providing the entertainment at strip clubs demand justice as a united front—there will be little owners can do to stop them.

After all, says Marie, “without us, there would be no club.” ■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SELECTION OF ADULT BOOKS...
SAVING FOR RETIREMENT HEALTH CARE MADE EASY
GUIDE TO MORTGAGES FILING FOR DIVORCE
PARENTING FOR DUMMIES HOW TO DO YOUR TAXES
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WE'RE HERE FOR A LONG TIME
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OPEN
24HRS

CHASING THE LAST LAUGH

One year after earning the disdain of Republicans, journalists and a few liberal women, **Michelle Wolf** is ready to do it again—and maybe help the country too

BY **STEPHEN RODRICK**

Michelle Wolf is not a fan of Donald Trump humor. She thinks it's all a bit hacky. "I personally hate Trump jokes," says Wolf, who a year ago vowed to burn down the annual White House Correspondents' Association Dinner and then did so in such definitive fashion nothing was left except scorched tuxedos. She doubles down: "I have not heard a good Trump joke in years."

Alas, on a recent frozen night at New York's legendary Comedy Cellar, three of the four comedians who take the stage before Wolf unleash Trump jokes. They are all lame. Then Wolf makes her way to the mike through a maze of tables occupied by drunk accountants and couples on first dates. She's wearing blue jeans, a gray sweater and a muted pair of Nikes. (The long-distance runner has become known for performing in glam high-topped sneaks, her collection being her concession to consumerism.) Her trademark voluminous curly red hair—which Wolf once described on *The Daily Show With Trevor Noah* as a hybrid of classic Annie and modern African American Annie—has been straightened.

Wolf is working on new material, which means her routine is semi-embargoed. Suffice it to say, there are no Trump jokes. Her 2017 HBO special, *Nice Lady,* featured bits on period farts, the impossibility of the modern woman having it all and a theory that men's testicles resemble a goblin's coin purse. Her new material is in the same unfiltered vein.

At one point she seems to suggest—in a high-pitched voice she jokes often attracts stray dogs—that men don't need to worry about the women's movement because women have a tendency to devour their own. For anyone who paid attention to the aftermath of Wolf's Correspondents' Dinner set, it's obvious why sharing this is not in breach of the embargo.

When Wolf finishes a few minutes later, she leaves the claustrophobic basement to applause exponentially louder than the combined clapping for all the dudes with the Trump jokes. It was her 10th show of the week.

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Before April 28, 2018, you may have recognized Michelle Wolf only from bits she did on *Late Night With Seth Meyers* and *The Daily Show.* She'd written jokes for Chris Rock's 2016 Academy Awards monologue and nabbed her HBO special a year

STYLING BY STEPHANIE TRICOLA AT HONEY ARTISTS; DRESS BY PRABAL GURUNG, JEWELRY BY MICHELE VARIAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID URBANKE**

"I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE YOUR MORAL COMPASS. I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE YOUR PHILOSOPHER."

later. But last year's Correspondents' Dinner propelled her into a different orbit, one filled with Fox News condemnations and finger-wagging from professional women who thought she'd been too harsh on White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a proven serial liar. Some even suggest the WHCA's decision to have presidential biographer Ron Chernow deliver this year's keynote was in response to Wolf's polarizing set. It's the first time a comedian hasn't performed at the event since 2003.

There's just one thing: Michelle Wolf does not give a fuck. She knew exactly what she was doing.

When Wolf was first approached to speak at the dinner—D.C.'s chummy get-together between plush talking heads and the plutocrats and politicians they're supposedly holding accountable—she thought there must have been a mistake. "They were like, 'We'll get a woman,' " she tells me backstage at another of her shows, this time at Nashville's Zanies. "I'm sure they thought, She won't do anything crazy. She'll be nice." Wolf smiles. "They should have done more research on me."

While Wolf is wary of her comedy epitaph becoming "The Girl From the Correspondents' Dinner," she's happy to set the record straight and settle some scores. Before accepting the gig, Wolf talked with Meyers, her ex-boss and mentor, who had given the dinner keynote in 2011, and asked if she should do it. He told her yes but warned about performing in a room with bad acoustics and drunken robber barons barely paying attention.

"I made the decision to not cater to them," Wolf tells me. "I don't like what they're doing right now. I don't think it's the right time for them to have a chuckle at the way things are going."

Before she took the stage, a comedian friend slipped her a note: "Burn it down." Another texted, "If they're cringing, you're doing it right." Shortly before the ceremony started, she ran into Margaret Talev, a *Bloomberg* reporter and WHCA board member. That's when she realized the organizers were in for a shock. Talev asked if Wolf would be wearing a gown. She told Talev she was going to wear a suit.

"Margaret said, 'Oh, I'm wearing pants too. It's like my little stick-it-to-the-man.' I thought to myself, Oh, you have no idea what is coming," Wolf says.

What has been forgotten in the swirl of post-dinner contretemps is that Wolf was an equal-opportunity slagger. She went after Al Franken, who had been forced to resign after allegations of groping: "Things are changing; men are being held accountable. Al Franken was ousted. That one really hurt liberals. I believe it was the great Ted Kennedy who said, 'Wow, that's crazy. I murdered a woman.' "

She threw a zinger at liberal saint Rachel Maddow, calling her "the Peter Pan of MSNBC, but instead of never growing up, she never gets to the point." She went after MSNBC's *Morning Joe* hosts: "I watch *Morning Joe* every morning. We now know Mika and Joe are engaged. Congratulations, you guys. It's like when #MeToo works out."

Wolf also nailed the Trump Industrial Complex wherein the media wrings its hands over the president while gleefully amping his every movement for profit: "He's helped you sell your papers and your books and your TV. You helped create this monster, and now you're profiting off of him. If you're going to profit off of Trump, you should at least give him some money, because he doesn't have any."

But a year later, the post-game analysis remains critical of Wolf's purported woman-on-woman comedy crimes—not against Maddow or Mika Brzezinski but Sanders.

"We are graced with Sarah's presence tonight," said Wolf. Sanders sat a few feet away. "I have to say I'm a little starstruck. I love you as Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*." The room grumbled at the reference to a character who delights in oppressing other women. Wolf pressed on. "I actually really like Sarah. I think she's very resourceful. She burns facts, and then she uses that ash to create a perfect smoky eye. Like maybe she's born with it; maybe it's lies. It's probably lies."

Wolf left the stage to a confused reception. Then the social media monsters began breathing napalm.

The Hill called her "fame-hungry" and *The Hollywood Reporter* pushed out the headline MICHELLE WOLF GOES LOW WITH RAUNCHY HUMOR. Trump trashed her—which was to be expected—but then women in the press began coming to Sanders's defense. NBC majordomo Andrea Mitchell said Wolf owed Sanders an apology. *New York Times* reporter and Trump whisperer Maggie Haberman tweeted, "That @PressSec sat and absorbed intense criticism of her physical appearance, her job performance, and so forth, instead of walking out, on national television, was impressive."

Haberman's remarks earned the biggest eye roll from Wolf. "She's part of the problem; she's 100 percent access journalism," Wolf says, taking a sip of her drink (prosecco mixed with Aperol) and shaking her head in wonder. "Like Andrea Mitchell, Mika Brzezinski—they all came out and said things, and I was like, No, you guys just want to maintain your access—especially Maggie. She's working on a book. They also had to say it to take attention away from my calling them out for using Trump to make money."

Wolf points out that Sanders didn't stand earlier in the ceremony when reporters received awards. She explains that she wasn't making fun of Sanders's appearance; if Wolf regrets anything, it is not adding an extra beat expressing her sincere appreciation for Sanders's makeup. (Sanders politely declined PLAYBOY's request for comment.) She also notes that no one complained about her jokes citing Paul Ryan's lack of balls and Chris Christie's weight.

"What still bothers me is the way so many in the press criticized

her," Meyers says. "She wasn't a contest winner. She was a comedian they hired based on her body of work. Why should she tamp down her style to fit some weird idea of decorum most people don't care about?"

A month later Netflix premiered *The Break With Michelle Wolf,* which she executive produced. Some say Wolf's set was designed to drum up excitement for her show, but with only a 10-episode order—consider how many shows Conan O'Brien needed before he got good—*The Break* had little chance to succeed. It has some bright moments, however, including her roast of the comedic political lectures popularized by John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* and Meyers's *Late Night* segment "A Closer Look." On *The Break,* Wolf skewers the format, calling hers "Segment Time."

"It doesn't necessarily make you think more or change your opinion at all," says Wolf of the format. "It just reinforces what you think, and we're living in a climate right now where things are so off-balance that people just want someone to say a logical thing. I don't think that's the right way to do comedy."

She starts to laugh.

"But they still have shows, so what do I know?"

• • •

The great irony in Wolf being trashed by powerful women is that she has built her entire career highlighting, in a sometimes graphic manner, how unfair life can be for women, whether it's working mothers or Hillary Clinton. On her HBO special, she says, "If you're a woman in power and think you're well-liked, you are so wrong. There are e-mails to prove it." She has described HRC as unlikable—the kind of person you run to the bathroom to avoid at a party. But she believes that's how a woman in power has to be. She will never come off like a good old boy.

"I would have loved if Hillary had been like, 'Hey, you guys are being real sexist talking about my smile, and yeah, I fucked up on the e-mails, okay, but I'm a grandmother, and I know what I'm talking about. I've been here forever. I'm super qualified,' " she says.

I ask Wolf if she's had feminist mentors. "That's an interesting question. I don't think I've ever been asked that," she says. Instead of naming a comedian or an author, Wolf focuses on her childhood in "the middle middle class" of Hershey, Pennsylvania. She idolized her two older brothers and wanted to go wherever they went, which meant pretending she was one of the dudes. "I don't even think my brothers knew I had a period," Wolf says. "It was one of those things where I was just trying so hard to fit in with the boys that it was like, *They can't hear about this.*"

Unlike Chris Rock, who was doing stand-up in his teens, or Judd Apatow, who interviewed comedians at the comedy club where his mother worked before his testicles had dropped, Wolf came to comedy later. She grew up a track athlete and cites that as a source of motivation when trying to write new jokes. ("You might have set a personal best, but they just move the bar higher until you fail," she says.) She went to the College of William & Mary, joining a track and field team there, but injured herself; that ended her sports career.

It left her wondering what to do next. The first thought wasn't comedy. "I knew I wanted to make money," she says, citing a comfortable childhood during which she was surrounded by friends who were supremely more comfortable than she. After graduating with a kinesiology degree, she went to work at Bear Stearns during the Great Recession and saw older colleagues lose everything. To this day, Wolf doesn't trust the stock market; her money sits in a noninvested Schwab account.

She went with friends to a taping of *Saturday Night Live* and was hooked. She started taking improv classes and switched to stand-up about seven years ago. She eventually got noticed by Meyers. "Everything about her path to comedy seemed like it would be a plus for us—passionate, hard worker, risk-taker," he says. "Plus we fell in love with her lilting, almost hypnotic voice."

Wolf worked for Meyers for two years before Trevor Noah poached her. While she takes pains to point out the men who've helped her, she recognizes it wasn't a level playing field.

"There are plenty of male comics who have kids and go on the road. Women wait to have kids later, when they're more successful and can afford help," says Wolf. One of the other double standards that chafes her is what she perceives to be a woman's need to answer for a man's behavior. Recently, Wolf encountered picketers after appearing on a bill at the Comedy Cellar with the dethroned Louis C.K., someone Wolf once opened for on the road. She endured women asking how she could call herself a feminist and have her name on the same show as the serial masturbator.

"Journalists just want a headline about Louis, and to me, that's not helpful and definitely not my responsibility," says Wolf. This is the only moment during our interview that she gets testy. "It's not my job to clean up the mess of something a man did. I'm not going to sacrifice my spots at a place where I'm most productive just to prove a point that's not going to go anywhere."

This year, Wolf has indeed not sacrificed her spots. She's touring the U.S. through May and hops overseas this summer. She has auditioned for a few acting roles, but most of her time is spent working on her next special and tour. She recently ran a 50-mile ultra-marathon and found herself turning jokes over in her mind until mile 42, when she nearly passed out. "You have to keep moving or it can all go away," she says.

And she watches the 2020 presidential race with trepidation. While her comedy features support for abortion rights and improving living conditions for mothers, she dreads any female candidate making that her platform when so many families struggle to put food on the table. "I hear Kirsten Gillibrand is going to run on gender," she says. "That's a terrible idea, because you're going to get only the people who care about that. You can't eat equality. You're going to vote for the candidate who can get you a job."

Wolf knows this sounds bad—perhaps slightly anti-woman. She faces her palms out in the universal "Who knows?" pose.

"I'm not supposed to be your moral compass," she says. "I'm not supposed to be your philosopher. I'm not supposed to be your religion. I'm just supposed to be the person who says the thing that makes you laugh. And maybe makes you think differently."

Wolf pauses for a moment, pushing back her straightened hair.

"But most of all, makes you laugh." ■

New Old Expression: "Useless as a hound in a skiff."

Aqua Vitae

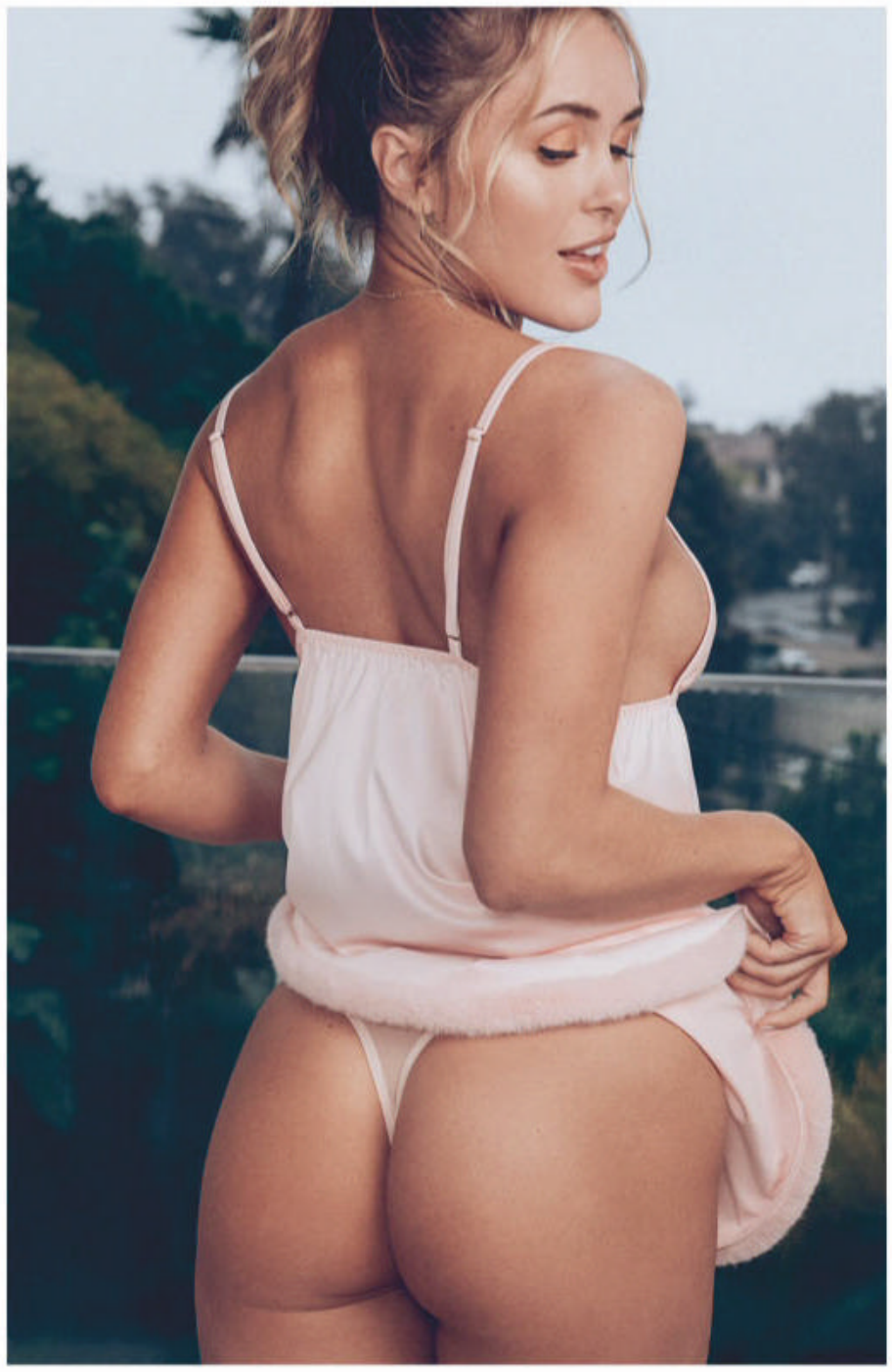
PHOTOGRAPHY BY

KAYLA VARLEY

STYLING BY KELLEY ASH

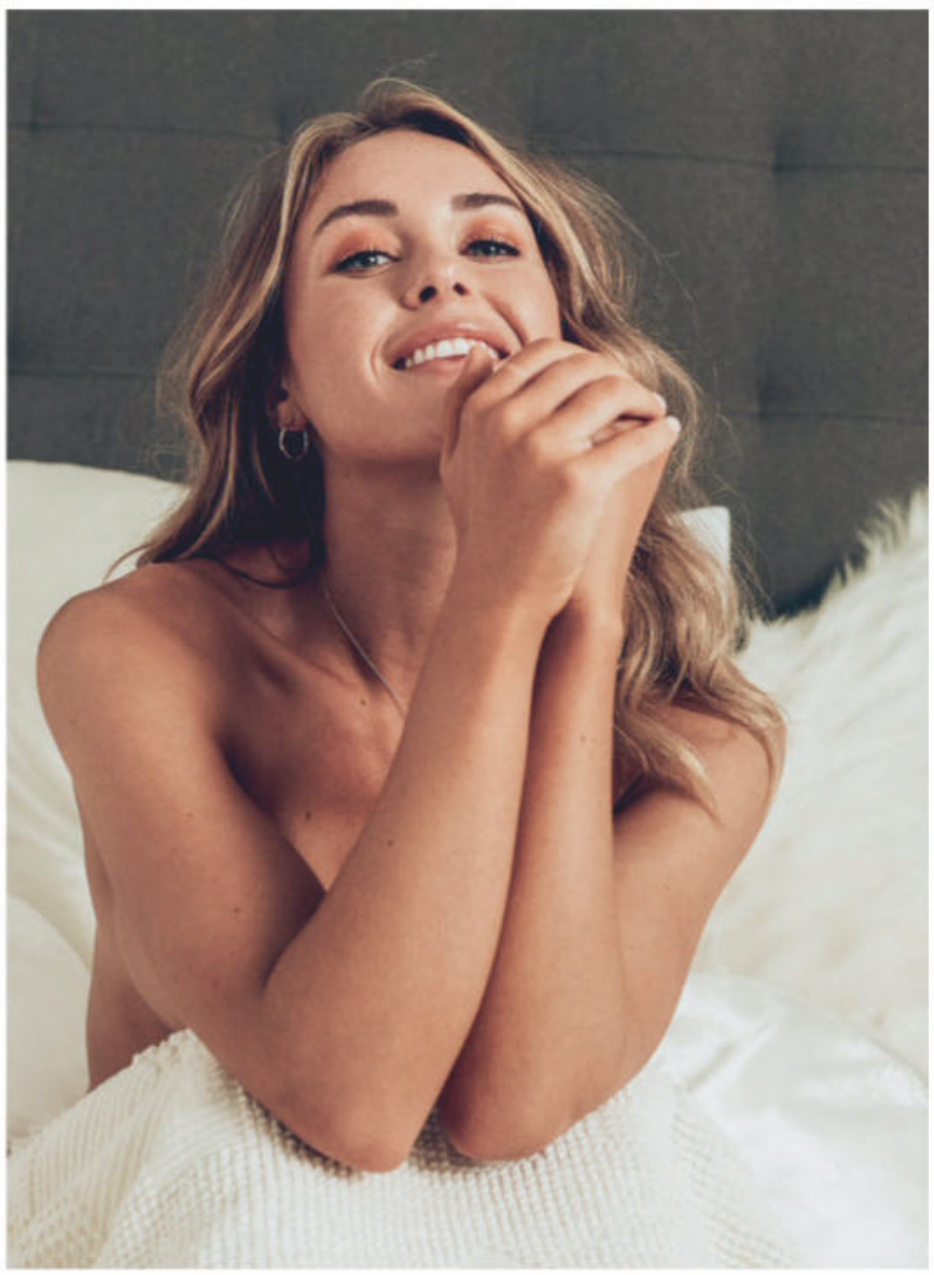
I know I can help other people, specifically women, find the confidence I didn’t have.

With an irrepressible energy kindled in her native Kansas and fanned on the West Coast, May Playmate ***Abigail O'Neill*** *is on a mission*



When I was 18, I packed my bags, rounded up $2,000 and got out of Kansas without saying a word to anyone. I had grown up in Wichita and gone to the University of Kansas in Lawrence for a semester, and suddenly I was moving to Seattle. I didn't know anyone there, but I wasn't happy in Kansas, where I knew *everyone* and just felt complacent, like I wasn't destined to be there. I knew the only way I could change that was by changing my life. It was scary—I slept in the car on the way up—but like they say, without great risk there's no reward.

Around the same time, I got really, really into nutrition and fitness. I transferred to Seattle University to study business and sports nutrition. And I started modeling—all fitness at first, because so many of those brands are headquartered in the Northwest. It was my agent at Wilhelmina who brought up the idea of modeling for PLAYBOY. To be honest, I was a little worried about what my dad would think, but at the same time I was excited. The PLAYBOY team told me, "You're going to be part of the family." I really liked that, and

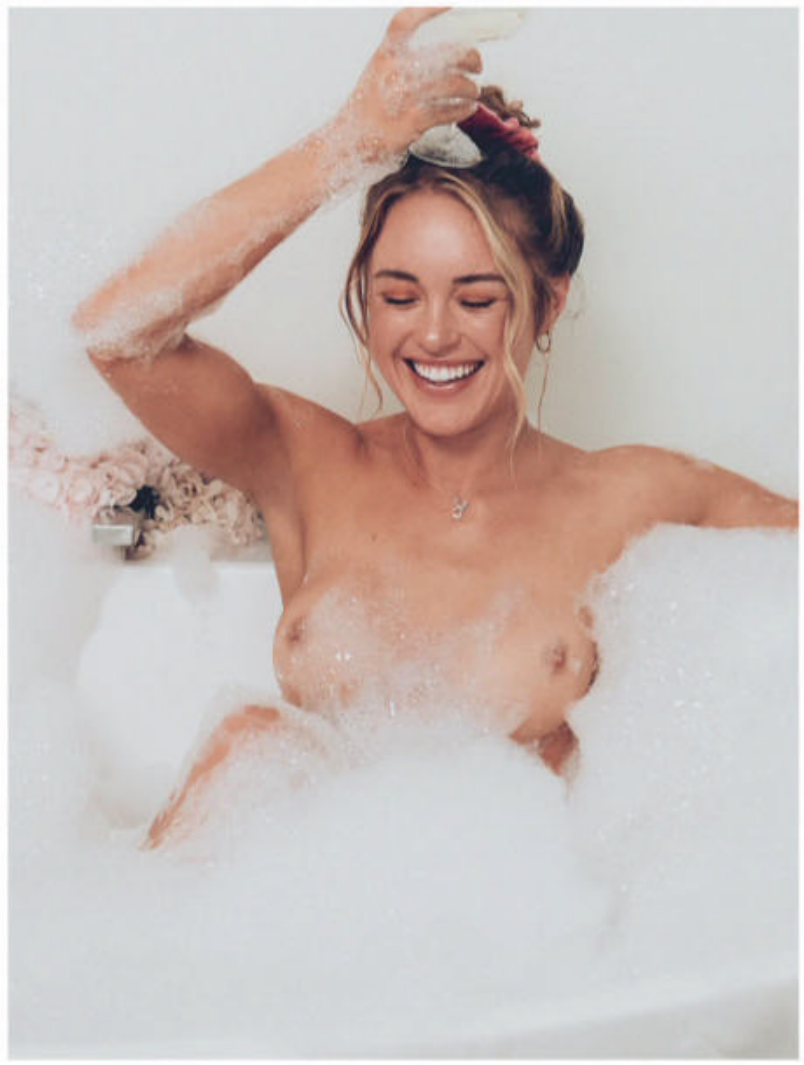


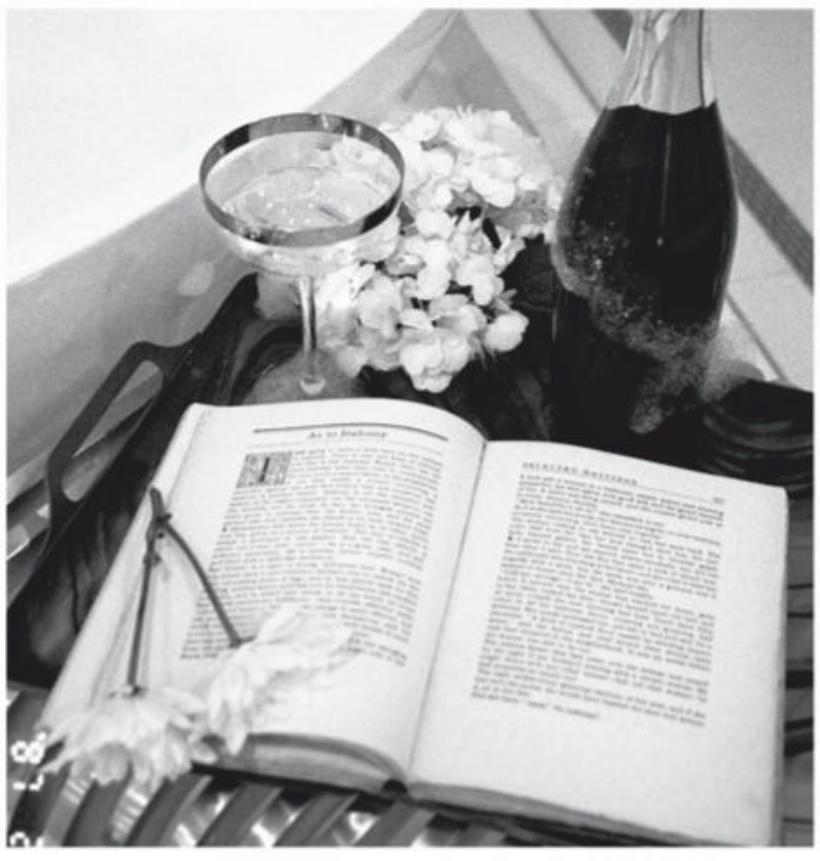
I enjoy what the brand is turning into. It has evolved, and the pictorials are done tastefully—it's art.

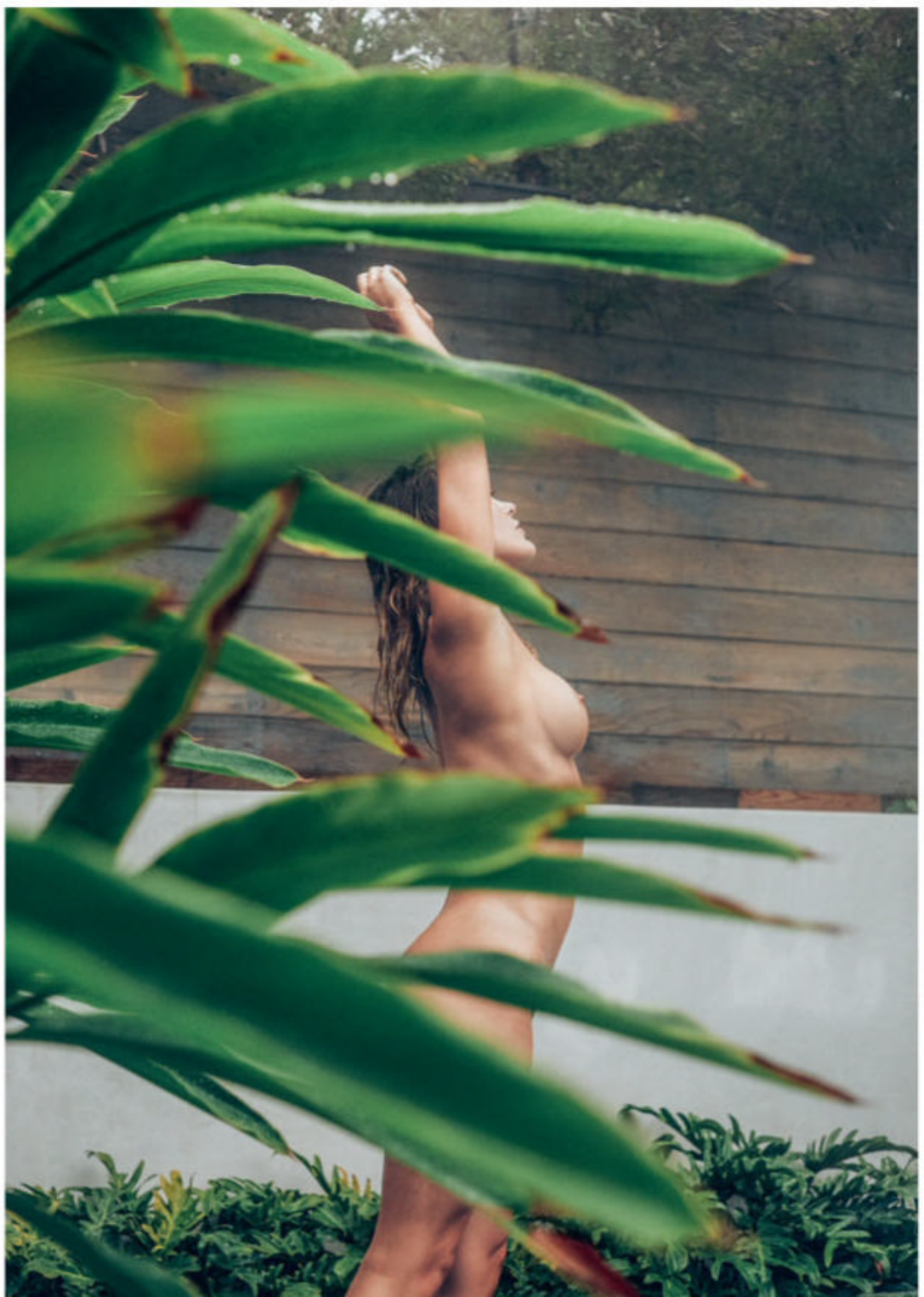
The shoot was so much fun. I was sipping champagne in the bathtub! And the nudity? I'm pretty comfortable. Sometimes I'm a little shy, but I'm getting past that. As long as it's done well, I have no problem. The human body is beautiful.

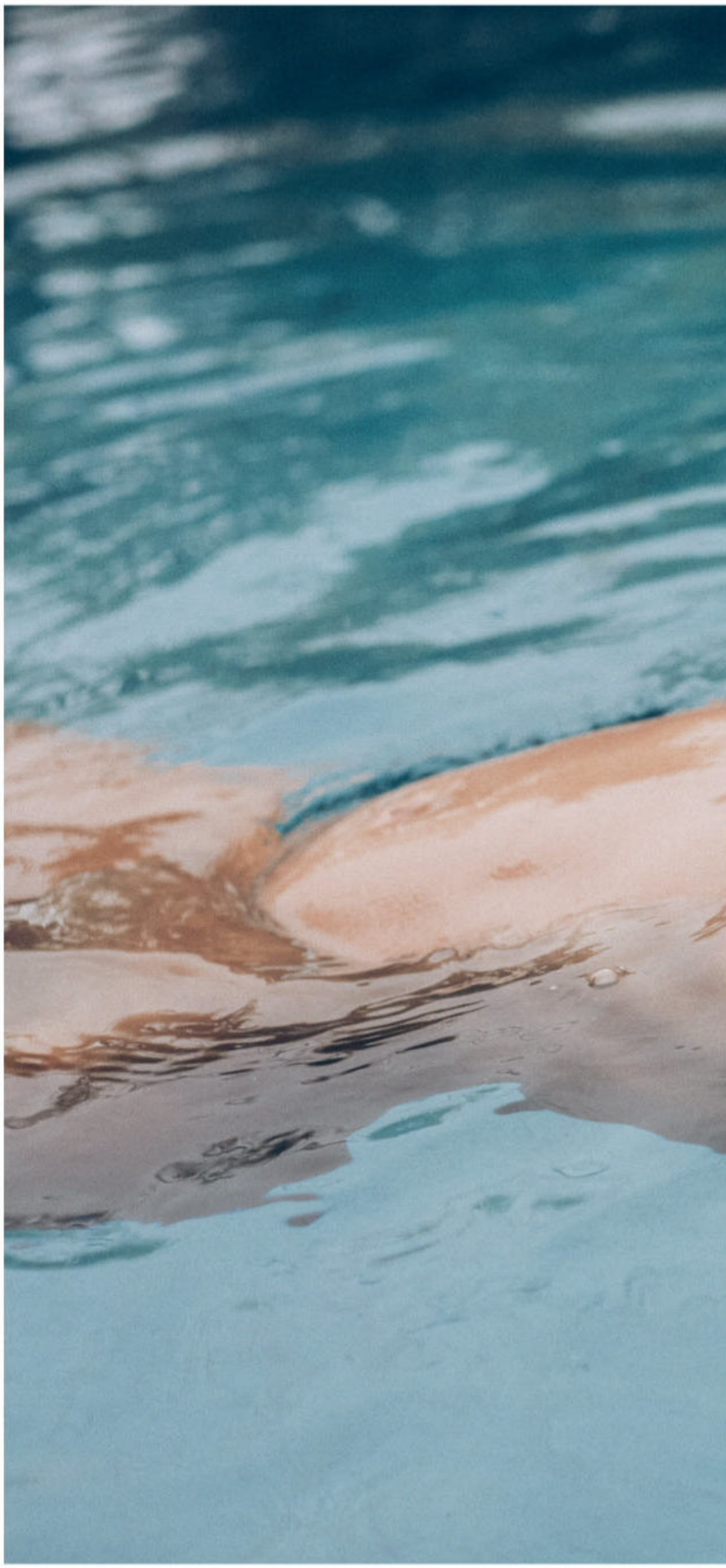
People look at my body like, "Oh, you were born with that," but I worked hard to be where I am right now. I had been skinny fat—naturally skinny but not really in shape—before I got into training. I started buying my own groceries at the age of 13 or 14, because my family doesn't eat healthily. It started off, I'm not going to lie, as more of an eating disorder, but I turned it into educating myself and figuring out what I was putting into my body. I've learned so much from the way I train and what I've done for my health. I think a lot of other women can too; that's the reason I started training, the reason I shot for PLAYBOY. I still have a lot of things to work through, but working out and building that foundation have given me new confidence.

That confidence is the reason I want to make a career of this. I know I can help other people, specifically other women, find the confidence I didn't have. We're all searching for it in different ways, but if you can empower yourself and others, it's a beautiful thing. I just want to keep growing.









DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: Wichita, Kansas **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

ON THE SIMPLE LIFE

We didn't have cell phones when we were young; at least I didn't. We were all about going outside, playing, riding our bikes—just a simple, fun life. I'm glad I was raised in the Midwest, because it gave me a better sense of things. I feel I'm a lot more grounded because of it.

ON FAMILY TIES

I have two older siblings, one younger sibling and four step-siblings. My dad remarried, and all the kids are about the same age. We all went to school together. Now most of us are out of the house, so family gatherings are big.

ON LEAVING HOME

My family supports me through everything I do. My dad convinced me that if I was ever having a hard time, I could come back to Kansas, but I think they've given up on that. Clearly, I made the jump.

ON COMPETITION

I'm always thinking, How can I be better than I was yesterday? What can I do differently? You shouldn't think of other people as competition, but so many people out there are "on it," and if you're not, you're going to get washed away.

ON FITNESS GOALS

When I lived in Seattle I went hiking every weekend. I never went out—I worked out. I'm always trying to find a new way to work my body. I'm a trainer at heart; that's my forte. I like anything that gets my heart racing.

ON LOVE & HIP-HOP

I'm into old-school hip-hop, so obviously I love Biggie Smalls, Tupac, Nas and Ja Rule. I was raised around all that stuff. My favorite song since I was a kid is "Into You" by Fabolous featuring Tamia. When I get married, I don't know how it will happen, but that song has to be played somewhere.

ON RELATIONSHIPS

I'm a relationship girl; I don't sleep around. Every guy I sleep with, I date, and it's because I get attached. I've never been on Tinder or anything like that—it's not really my scene—but I think it has definitely changed the game. Hooking up is all people seem to want to do nowadays, and they do it so casually. I've never looked at it that way. What's the point?

ON MOTIVATION

I firmly believe that you should never be the smartest person in the room. What motivates me is knowing my potential, knowing what I want. Things won't always go my way, but the hope and the possibility of making things happen are what wake me up in the morning.

Abigail Neill

MAY 2019 PLAYMATE

MAY 2019 PLAYMATE

THE KISS

ETERNAL YET EPHEMERAL, LUST COMES SHARPLY INTO FOCUS...AND FADES

FICTION BY **ROBERT COOVER**

Their lips are poised to meet in a classic gesture of pure desire. Her lips are soft and vulnerable, easily bruised, his more determined, principled, their mouths slightly open as though to ask a question. Do they know each other? It doesn't matter. Only the imminent meeting of their yearning mouths matters. There is something gravely intimate about the moment, something almost sacred in its graceful choreography.

He is handsome in a rugged honest way; she is radiantly beautiful. A disembodied narrative voice is quietly cataloging: her heaving bosom, her flushed throat, her fluttering eyelids, her supple hips. Which could be where the man's unseen hands are, just below the frame, these his general impressions. Are their lips moving? Perhaps they are whispering something to each other. Or maybe they simply like the feel of moving lips, brushing softly against their own.

The voice speaks now of the frame's grip on a composed reality, its power to clasp and hold an image abstracted from the ceaseless flow of time, as the two gaze longingly into each other's eyes. A tear glitters in one of hers. His, shadowed by the brim of his fedora, betray an infinite sadness, and we too feel sad; how can we not? In their eyes—lenses facing in and out at the same time—we see what they see and feel what they feel. We are inside their kiss, tasting the proximity of their lips, suffering their anguish, their ardor, their aroused anatomies (there are chemicals involved, hormones). We know nothing about them beyond this embrace, but we sense that, whoever they are, they are about to part.

Yes, something is ending. This is a farewell kiss. The steady rightward drift of the poignant image toward the looming edge (she seems about to swoon!) confirms this. As does the gentle voice, speaking now of the panoramic frame's generous plenitude, its sensuous embodiment of the rational—or maybe the irrational?—as it succumbs to the roar of city traffic. Their lips have not yet met, but too late, they are crossing the threshold of the frame and disappearing into the obscure uncertainties beyond, swept away by the noisy rush of a congested city throughway. As hundreds of cars and trucks race by in both directions, brakes shrieking, horns and sirens blaring, a phantasmal image of the parting lovers appears on them, as though to say such a vision is not easily dismissed. We catch intermittent glimpses on the traffic's flickering blur of their eyes, their mouths, their hats—though without the comforting integrity of the frame: It is impossible to know what is the container, what the contained. But then the traffic too slides away into the emptiness at the advancing edge, carrying the ghostly lovers with it, the automotive roar sinking to a background hum, and then that dies too.

The throughway unravels to an empty country road, spooling through a bleak desert landscape like the thread of time. It is utterly silent out here, but for a soft breath of wind and the distant caws of predatory birds. After miles and miles of flat emptiness, a lone structure appears on the side of the road, a building long since abandoned, its roof fallen in, its doors boarded up, its broken marquee atilt. There is an old poster, yellowed with time, affixed to the wall under the marquee. It advertises a movie called *The Kiss,* and the two parting lovers are pictured on it in the same iconic scene of pathos and desire seen before.

One can hear, like wind chimes, the faint echoey tinkle of carousel music. As we approach the tattered poster, the image on it pivots, and we now face the slightly crossed eyes of the woman, gazing up wistfully into the face of the man, just beyond her nose, his back to us. She is still dressed in glowing white, and he is hatted, but the rest of his clothing is gone, his pale buttocks being used now as a screen for the projection of the original image: their rapt gaze, their yearning mouths, she on the verge of swooning. It is like a frame within a frame, reminding us of the rugged persistence of imbedded memory. The picture is grainy and water-spotted, adding to its romantic old-movie atmosphere, though that may be due in part to the texture of the screen. The darkness between his thighs seems to beard her, and their embrace is cloven and distorted, but their longing gaze across the dark divide still compels attention, and cues our own emotions. Their melancholy is again our melancholy, their ardor our ardor, the screen's imperfections only augmenting the tender gravity of the moment.

But then it is over. The projected embrace recedes, as does its screen and the man who provided it, the wistful woman too—they all shrink away, as if to say we have seen all there is to be seen. There is only the desolate country road, the ruined cinema, and soon they are gone too—in the dreadful silence, a distant snap of elastic against flesh can be heard, a rip, a gasp—leaving only the ever vaster emptiness of the desert, stretching in all directions as far as the eye can see, like an image of the end of time. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

DYNAMITE COMICS PRESENTS

VAMPIRELLA

IN

MAKE UP TO BREAK UP

EAST PRECINCT, SEATTLE P.D.

GAIL SIMONE WRITER

JOYCE CHIN ARTIST

ADDISON DUKE COLORIST
NATHAN ROSITO LETTERER

SO, MR. AND MS. WELKER, I JUST WANT TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE BOTH ALL RIGHT.

THE FORENSICS PEOPLE HAVE YOUR, *uh*, "OUTFITS," AND THERE'S BLOOD SPATTER ALL *OVER* THEM.

Oh, PLEASE CALL US TONI AND TIMOTHY, DETECTIVE CHO. *EVERYONE* DOES.

AND THE BLOOD, IT'S NOT OURS.

IT BELONGED TO...BELONGED TO...

I'M SORRY, CAN WE JUST GO HOME NOW?

I'M AFRAID NOT, MR. WELKER.

NOW, I'VE BEEN BRIEFED, BUT A LOT OF THIS JUST FLEW RIGHT OVER MY HEAD.

SO, HELP ME JUST UNDERSTAND THIS, OKAY?

YOU SAY YOU WERE ATTACKED. IN THE *PARK*.

BY *"MONSTERS"*?

NO, NO, NO, *WE* WERE THE MONSTERS. I MEAN, *DRESSED* AS MONSTERS.

AND THE *ATTACKERS*, WELL, THEY WERE COSPLAYERS TOO.

MONSTER COSPLAYERS.

LIKE *US*.

"COSPLAYERS"...?

IT MEANS WE DRESS AS CHARACTERS, SIR. FOR CUSTOM PHOTO SHOOTS AND CONVENTIONS, YOU KNOW? IN OUR CASE, WELL...WE LIKE MONSTERS.

SEXY MONSTERS.

WE HAVE HALF A MILLION *FOLLOWERS* ON *InstaFame!*

"SEE, WE'RE ALWAYS HAVING TO COME UP WITH NEW *CONTENT* FOR OUR SUBSCRIBERS AND PATRONS. THEY GET BORED FAST, DETECTIVE.

"AND TONIGHT, WE'D AGREED TO A PRIVATE COMMISSION WITH WHAT WE *THOUGHT* WERE TWO EXPERIENCED COSPLAYERS.

"AT NIGHT. IN THE *PARK.*"

I DON'T *LIKE* THIS, TIM.

IT'S GOOD MONEY, BABE. IT'LL BE OKAY.

HOW'S MY HAIR? GOOD?

WAIT. WE'RE HERE.

HELLO?

WE'RE HERE FOR THE PHOTO SHOOT?

YES. I'M *AGATHA RENFORD.* THIS IS MY HUSBAND, *VARGO.*

AND AREN'T YOU BOTH JUST *SCRUMPTIOUS?*

THIS IS GOING TO BE *SUCH* GOOD FUN.

VARGO, COME MEET OUR *GUESTS.*

NOW, YOU *KNOW* THERE'S BEEN A *RASH* OF MURDERS IN YOUR... COMMUNITY, RECENTLY?

RIGHT, BUT THEY CAME *HIGHLY* RECOMMENDED! *FOUR AND HALF STARS!*

ONLY...

YES? "ONLY" *WHAT?*

"ONLY WE DIDN'T KNOW THEY'D GONE FULL *CANNIBAL.*"

I'M AFRAID YOU'VE BECOME TOO *POPULAR,* MY FRIENDS.

AND WE SIMPLY CAN'T *HACK* THE COMPETITION.

CAN WE, VARGO?

YES, MISTRESS.

SO *HACK* THEM, DEAREST!

YES, MISTRESS.

GAAAAAH!!

"AND THEN WE *RAN,* DETECTIVE."

WHY ARE YOU *DOING* THIS?!

AND THAT IS SOME *SPECTACULAR* MAKEUP WORK, BY THE WAY.

YOU'RE *TOO KIND.*

"BUT EVENTUALLY, WE JUST RAN OUT OF PLACES TO *RUN.*"

NO. *PLEASE.*

YOU SEE, WE'VE FOUND... LET'S CALL IT A *SPECIALTY* MARKET, SHALL WE?

THEY'RE JUST GOING TO *EAT YOU RIGHT UP.*

THE GUY FIRST, VARGO.

YES, MISTRESS.

LET ME *STOP* YOU THERE FOR A MOMENT, AGATHA, IF I MAY.

I HAVE *ALL* YOUR SHOOTS, KIDS.

FANTASTIC WORK. *VISIONARY,* REALLY.

A LITTLE *STICKY* AT THE END, PERHAPS.

INTERESTING WAY TO CORNER THE *MARKET,* I MUST SAY.

WAIT! STAY BACK!

LOOK, I GET IT. TIMES ARE TOUGH. AND I DON'T KINK-SHAME.

BUT I'M A *LIVE*-AND-*LET-LIVE* TYPE.

WHO--?

MY NAME'S *VAMPIRELLA.*

AND I'M A *HUGE* FAN OF YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY, HONESTLY.

Ah, BUT MY *FRIENDS* HERE, THEY'VE BEEN THROUGH JUST THE MOST *AWFUL* ORDEALS.

THEY *EARNED* THEIR LOOKS.

THEY HAVE A PHRASE FOR WHAT *YOU* DO, BY THE WAY.

"STOLEN *TERROR.*"

NOW, AS I SAID...I'M THE *LIVE*-AND-*LET-LIVE* TYPE.

BUT MY FRIENDS ARE FAR LESS FORGIVING.

"WE'RE NOT GOING TO SAY WE'LL *MISS* THEM, DETECTIVE.

"BUT TO BE FAIR, THEY ONLY BROKE CHARACTER AT THE VERY *END*."

AAIIIIEEEEEEEEEE!

WELL. I DON'T BELIEVE ANY OF THIS, BUT UPSTAIRS WANTS THE WHOLE THING KEPT ON THE DOWN LOW. AND YOU'RE TOO *GOOFY* TO BE GUILTY.

I GUESS YOU'RE FREE TO GO FOR NOW.

WE GOT YOU SOMETHING TO WEAR.

DO WE PUT OUT AN A.P.B., DETECTIVE?

FOR *WHAT*, RUIZ?

A *VAMPIRE SWIMSUIT MODEL* FROM THE PLANET *DRAKULON*?

HARD PASS.

IF YOUR STORY'S TRUE, SHE SAVED YOUR *LIVES*, YOU KNOW.

WE KNOW, DETECTIVE.

TRUST ME. WE'RE *DONE* WITH HORROR SHOOTS.

TOO MUCH *WEIRDNESS.*

FROM NOW ON, IT'S *STRICTLY* SCIENCE FICTION FOR US!

LOOK FOR THE ALL-NEW VAMPIRELLA #0 on May 4! See www.dynamite.com for more details.

FRANK GRILLO

FIGHTER, FATHER AND FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH: WHY THE HOLLYWOOD HEAVYWEIGHT IS JUST GETTING STARTED

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN PFLUGER** STORY BY **GIL MACIAS** STYLING BY **ANNIE & HANNAH**

Sundown in Los Angeles. A battered maroon Buick is parked near a rocky, industrial train yard. Showing off his physique through a tight white tee and $500 jeans, Frank Grillo emerges from a photo studio, his hair perfectly coiffed. Fake abrasions rough up the contours of his face. He's holding a pink cocktail. Everyone notices.

Hopping onto the roof of the car, Grillo thrusts himself into an action-hero pose. This comes naturally to him. For a moment it looks as though he's about to hurl a battle cry into the night sky. Instead, he launches into song: *"It's raining men!/Hallelujah!/It's raining men!"*

"Do it again!" a crew member encourages.

"Fuck *no!*" Grillo replies, grinning. The crew bursts into laughter.

This is my first glimpse of the martial-arts enthusiast who has become one of Hollywood's most dependable and in-demand action stars. The actor has been the muscle in such films as *Warrior, The Grey, Zero Dark Thirty, End of Watch* and two *Purge* outings, as well as on television in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, Prison Break* and *Kingdom*. He stars in the highest-grossing film ever released in China, *Wolf Warrior 2,* and this spring he'll briefly reprise his role as Crossbones in *Avengers: Endgame,* a tentpole blockbuster that, among Grillo's credits, follows the bare-knuckle-fighting indie thriller *Donnybrook,* in which he plays—in his own words—"pure fucking evil."

If we're to trust IMDb, Grillo is currently attached to no fewer than nine films, at least five of them expected this year. But his Netflix docuseries, *Fightworld,* released in October, may be his most compelling work to date. In the five-episode study of fighting cultures around the world, viewers see another side of Grillo, his temperament far from that of the brawny tough guy filmmakers hire him to be. Although he occasionally spars with the series' fighters to absorb their styles, Grillo spends most of his screen time observing both male and female athletes. Overall, *Fightworld* is an exploration of masculinity and strength at their most controlled and recognizable.

Over drinks in downtown Los Angeles after his shoot, the actor reflects on channeling a *Fight Club*–inspired sex symbol for PLAYBOY, of all publications. "I love going outside my comfort zone, and the shit we did today was wacky," he says. "You know, I like that. It's all good. I'll tell you what: Getting older and doing a lot of work on myself, and watching my kids grow up and becoming more well-rounded human beings, I don't judge things anymore. I don't judge myself. I don't judge other people, because everybody's on this journey."

Grillo, who turns 54 this June, says he "coasted" through the midlife crisis of entering his 50s. He gives Liam Neeson credit for "clearing the path for the older action hero," but Grillo's physicality is all his own. "Every weekend, I get on my dirt bike. I go into the mountains. I ride like I did when I was 25," he says. "I'm in the gym every fucking day. Until my body shuts down, I am what I am."

That declaration leads me to ask about his on-set drink choice. It turns out the mystery pink tipple was Whispering Angel rosé—not exactly the juice one would expect a brooding Bronx-born actor to order. But what's considered masculine these days, anyway? Grillo recognizes it as a point of contention in this cultural moment, and he doesn't shy away from addressing it. "I drink rosé all the time," he says matter-of-factly. "I get facials; I drink rosé. I need balance. What am I going to do, walk around with boxing gloves around my neck?"

A regular at L.A.'s boxing gyms, Grillo put his love for fighting to use on *Kingdom,* DirecTV's MMA series that ran from 2014 to 2017 and co-starred Nick Jonas as Grillo's closeted son. In the penultimate episode, Jonas's character comes out to his father, which leads to tragedy. Sexual orientation isn't a talking point on *Fightworld,* and in the real world openly gay male MMA fighters remain scarce. I ask Grillo whether MMA should be more welcoming of LGBTQ people and if he encountered any closeted fighters while filming *Fightworld*. "I don't think we're at that place yet, which is unfortunate," he says. "There might be a few,

WHITE T-SHIRT BY KELLY COLE, VINTAGE GOLD CHAIN, VINTAGE GOLD BRASS KNUCKLES

but it's still a hypermasculine, hyper-macho thing. I'm sure there are more than we know of. It's not something anybody walks around waving the flag for, you know?"

Grillo recognizes the necessity of visibility, however. He says he lost a friend to AIDS, and he has always been surrounded by gay men in his personal life. "My kids' godfather is gay. My favorite couples that my wife and I go out with are gay guys. They've been friends of ours forever. They have kids; we have kids. I've had friends come out early in their lives; I've had friends come out after they were married." He goes on: "I have three sons. If any one of them told me they were gay, I would be like, '*Good,* that's great. Okay, you're gay. Big fucking deal.' Like that shouldn't even be an issue. That's like saying 'I'm Italian' or 'I'm Irish.' Even my *goomba* father, who's now 75 years old, loves my gay friends, and my gay friends love him, you know what I mean?"

It may be surprising to hear Grillo speak so forcefully in support of a group not his own, but should it be? The actor time and again has shown he can break out of any box his résumé may suggest. Over a two-hour conversation, he tackles more topics than I could ask for: spirituality, transgender rights, his disdain for Trump. He's intentional in every move, every utterance—perhaps a trait he learned from fighting.

Given how ingrained fight culture is in Grillo's life, I'm curious about how he approaches the sport with his children.

"I always tell my kids, 'Avoid violence, avoid confrontation,' " he says. "You don't want confrontation. What you want is the ability, if confronted with violence, to defend yourself."

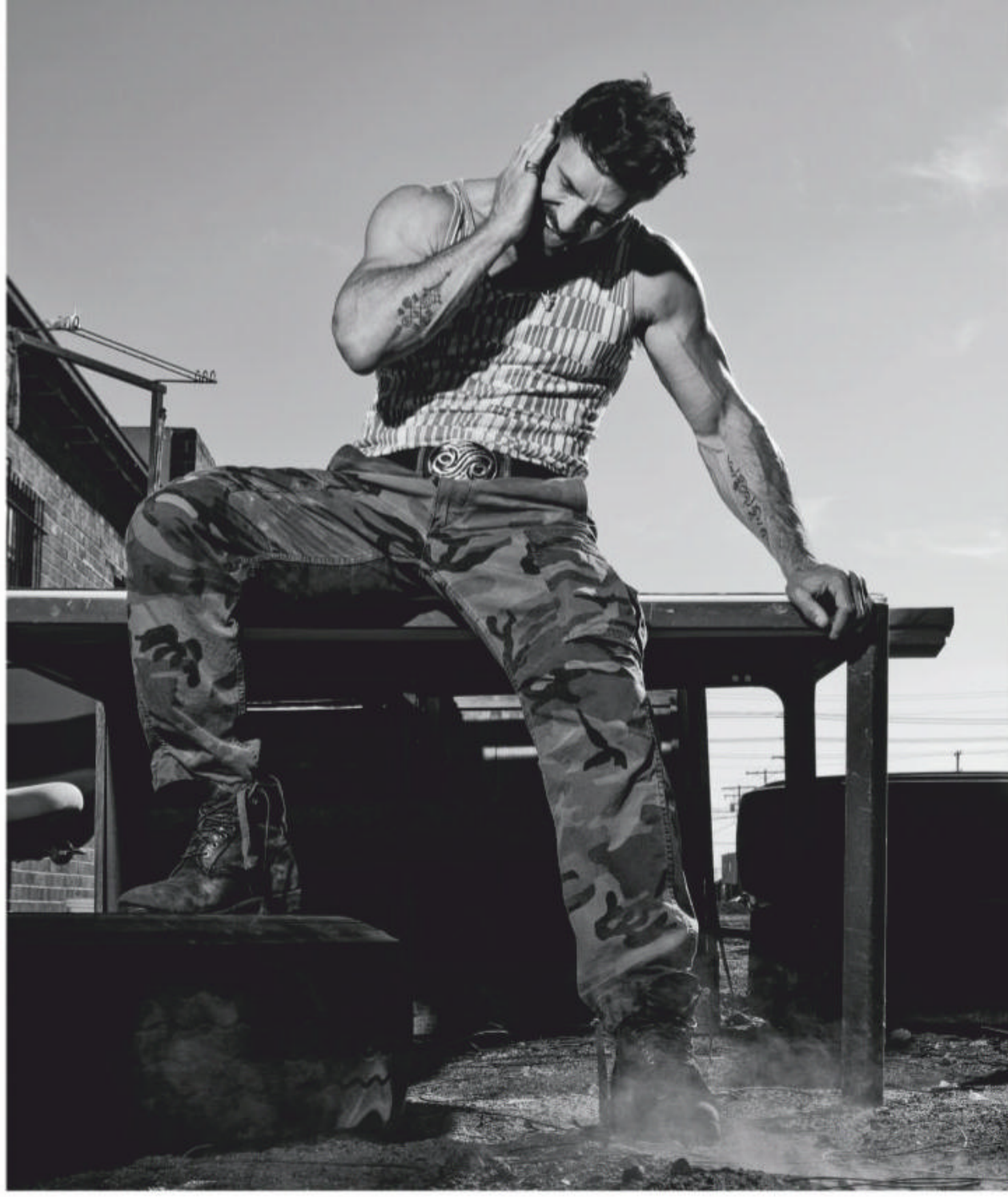
Indeed, Grillo's most important role is that of father, and his three sons are no strangers to the boxing gym. During his *Fightworld* travels, he encountered many young fighters, some living in extreme poverty. The primary lesson he took from that experience was as a father. "Here's the deal about my kids," Grillo says. "They've been privileged. They've lived really good lives. It's what every parent wants to do for their kids: to make their lives better than my life was—and I had a shitty childhood. But one thing I instill in them is to understand the value of everything they have and to appreciate it."

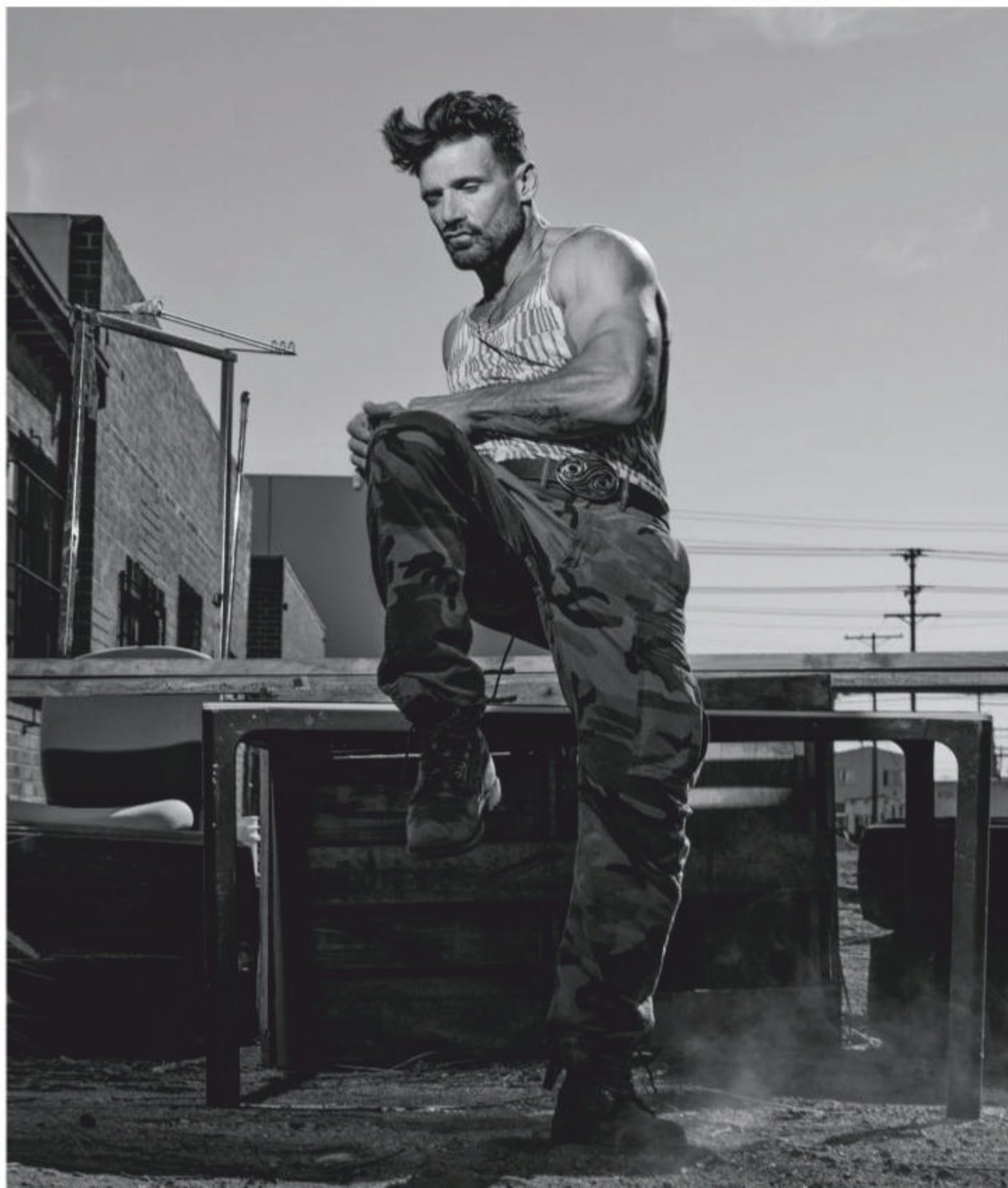
He adds, "You must give some of what you have to other people; that's key. You must pay it forward all the time, even if you don't have a lot. If you continue to pay it forward, we raise better human beings."

Earlier, Grillo mentioned a need for balance in his life. He's an action star and a boxer, and he's raising three sons. His life seems filled with testosterone, and rosé only goes so far, right? Did he ever wish he'd had a daughter? He vigorously shakes his head.

"Look at me in the face," he says. "No. There's a famous saying: Have a boy, worry about one penis. Have a girl, worry about all the penises."

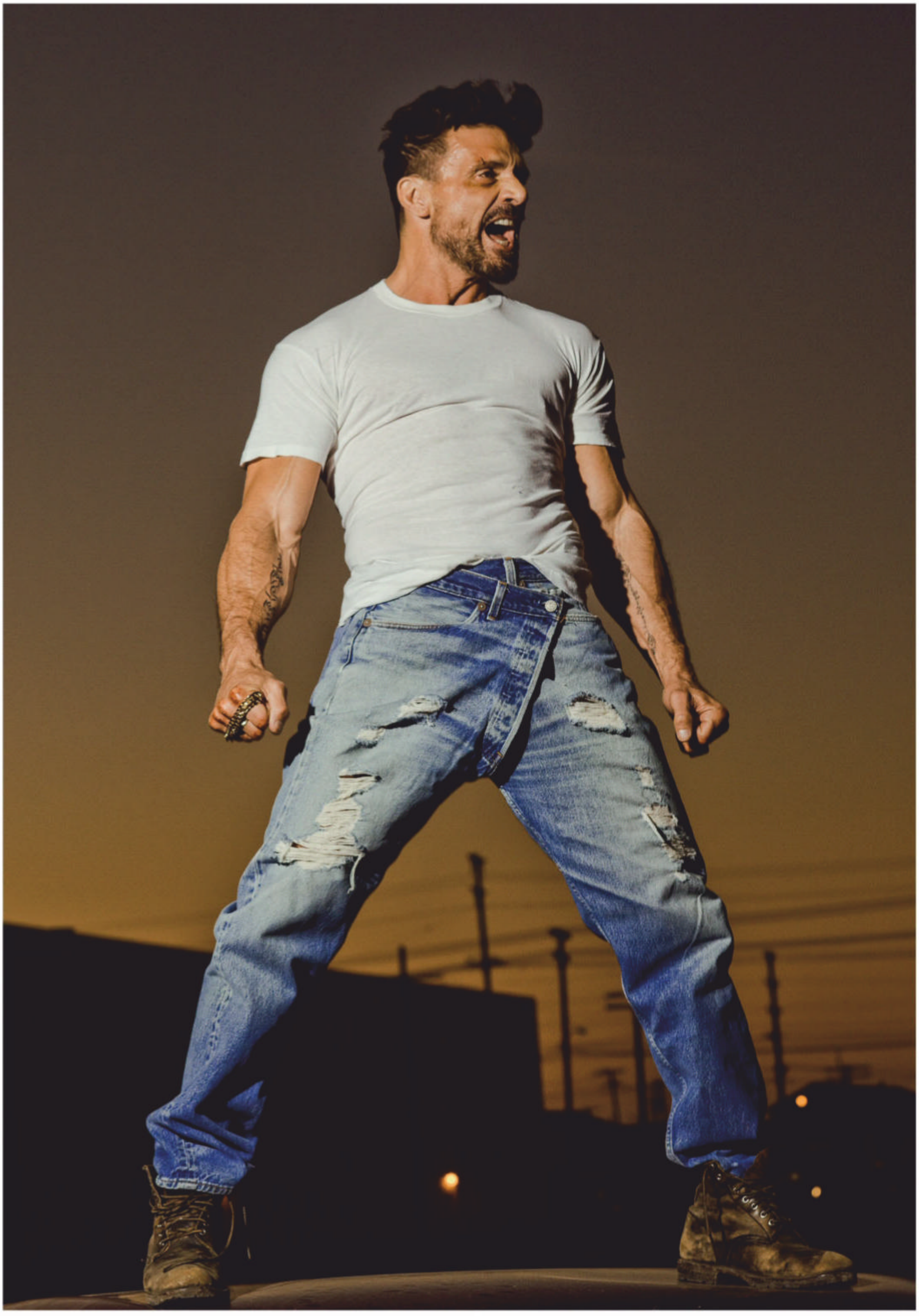
Although Netflix passed on a second season of *Fightworld,* there's no slowing down or hanging up the gloves for the actor who may yet become a Hollywood leading man in his 50s. "The martial artist Helio Gracie died at 95, rolling with his sons and his grandsons," Grillo says. "I'm not going to hang it up. I'll slow down. I'm not going to punch as fast—but it ain't happened yet."





VINTAGE LEATHER TRENCH, VINTAGE TANK TOP, NECKLACE BY GUCCI, RINGS BY M.COHEN, BELT BY SSS WORLD CORP., PANTS AND BOOTS GRILLO'S OWN

PLAYBOY



THIS SPREAD: WHITE T-SHIRT BY KELLY COLE, JEANS BY R13, VINTAGE GOLD CHAIN, VINTAGE BRASS KNUCKLES, BOOTS GRILLO'S OWN

PREVIOUS SPREAD: VINTAGE BUTTON-DOWN BY PLAYBOY, VINTAGE JEANS BY JEAN PAUL GAULTIER, RINGS AND BRACELET BY M.COHEN, SHOES BY SSS WORLD CORP.

TELL ME MORE

WE COULDN'T RESIST SHARING A FEW EXTRA GEMS (INCLUDING ONE TOOTH GEM) FROM OUR COVER SHOOT. ENJOY, AND REMEMBER: NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, YOU HAVE A MOUTH. USE IT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
KELIA ANNE

STYLING BY CHLOE & CHENELLE DELGADILLO; PROP STYLING BY CASEY HINDERS

WE ARE
NOT
HERE

FICTION BY **DAVID GILBERT**

There I am, 24 years old, playing 18, a young 18, emerging from the lake in just T-shirt and panties. I will be murdered soon. I am sitting next to my murderer. His name is Charlie Mooks, which is an ideal name for a murderer but a terrible name for an actor. Charlie hugged me when he saw me even though I haven't seen Charlie in decades. But we are bonded by that knife across my throat. Charlie's still huge, with more belly and less chin, patches of rosacea running across his face. He's a grandfather now. "I've got five grown children," he told me in the green room, shaking his head at this amazing fact. No one ever believes how many grown children they have. As Charlie talked, I recalled the Sephora I had passed when I was getting coffee. I knew the perfect moisturizer for him: an energizing vitamin C day cream. Maybe a protein booster serum as well. "I sell insurance, but don't worry, I'm not going to hit you up," Charlie said, after which he indicated good humor by laughing. He always was a terrible actor. But he's a naturally frightening presence: bald and dented, as close to being deformed without actually being deformed. Flakes of dead skin cling to the sides of his nose. I want to reach up and scoop the crud free. Like cleaning leaves from a gutter. I would show him. He would be amazed.

Another middle-aged man-boy steps forward, and I brace for conversation, imagining a cue card printed across his chest. He seems to be wearing a subtle costume which registers as a vague misunderstanding of how clothes should work in the world, particularly with his body type. He resembles a pear atop a pumpkin. I smile to put him at ease, but he's not nervous. He's paid decent money for this Horrorfest encounter: $50 for the personalized photo, $20 per additional item signed. He leans in close, the transactional nature breaking normal bounds. His complexion is cratered around the cheekbones, and I picture the moon in a fedora. He has a leather sheath strapped to his thigh, and I assume a plastic machete is tucked inside, though the handle has the matte finish of real metal. "Hello there," I say as though *there* is his name.

"Really cool to meet you," he says, nodding, "really cool, oh yeah, wow."

His voice surprises me. It is false yet effective, its smooth tone reminding me of late-night DJs listened through clock radios: me a teenager in bed, constructing saviors in my head, soft and sympathetic, unlike this face before me, which is waxing gibbous with unkempt sideburns. For some reason I expect he can play the harmonica.

"Nice to meet you too," I say.

I already have the Sharpie dangling over my chest, waiting.

"I was 10 when I first saw *Night's Scream,*" he says.

"Oh," I say.

They almost always tell me their age, particularly when their age was young, as though this indicates precociousness rather than lax parenting. A few had seen the movie in an actual theater, usually with an older brother, or snuck in with friends, or simply strolled in, since this was the mid-1970s and whatever was happening on the streets was probably worse. But most had caught me through the years on cable, or on VHS and then DVD, or now streamed on demand, so they watched me while sitting in living rooms or finished basements, puddled in beanbags, draped across chairs. They convened in pubescent groups. Sleepover scares. Occasionally girls joined in because they had been dared and being frightened with boys was the gateway to being a woman. Or the girls saved me for their own intimate affairs, after years of being tempted by soft-core chills—tonight, they would go all-in; tonight, they would see all that blood. Those girls have the best screams. The horror seems almost joyous for finally being public and permissible. But there are few girls in line here.

"I watched with my dad," he says.

"Oh, yeah?" I say, Sharpie still dangling over my chest, still waiting.

"Because I used to be scared of moths," he says, "a total fraidy-cat."

"Well, moths can be scary," I say, which I believe is true.

"But I'm not scared of them anymore," he says.

I conjure piranha-like moths swarming his head, but all I say is "That's great."

"I became scared of other things, worse things," he says.

"It's a scary world," I say.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

The others are better at this than I am. Certainly more experienced. Charlie Mooks begins by asking their names so he can start the signing and the handing back and the moving along process, formal yet friendly. But Charlie has the longest line and the most committed fan base. As tribute, some wear cheap donkey masks. The more extreme do the prosthetic makeup underneath, with the eyes and the teeth and the drool—they seem to really love the drool. These people also visit my line and greet their first victim by braying, and I pretend-gasp like these are the neighborhood kids on Halloween. I try thinking nice thoughts, like look how creative they are, how passionate, but in the end they're all my murderers. I make a point of writing their names over my poking nipples—*Stanley, Frankie, Miguel*—constructing a bra from black felt. And my old ridiculous stage name takes care of the panties and the conspicuous darkling V-shaped mound. When I dot the *i* in my belly button I think of Tania, roughly this size, resting in there. Then I hand the photograph back, having dressed myself in their desire. I've noticed Amy and Beth and Laura and Kim gauging the number of people in my line, ordering themselves after my early iconic death. I'm especially popular because this is my first convention. Even Karen seems to keep track, Karen who was the only survivor, who had the career before and after, until getting older took her life. These conventions are her main occupation. Plus she sells vitamins on Facebook. She also dabbles in real estate. She's the kind of person who calls herself an entrepreneur, who has this printed on business cards: Karen Locke, Entrepreneur. In the green room she greeted me like we were reunited best friends, and I had one of those moments where I had to find the person I once knew within the fright of aging. I tried keeping my expression neutral; I even said "You look wonderful" with stubborn conviction, like the situation was touch and go and she needed my support. But I understood the sentiment was contagious, Karen regarding me under the same grim prognosis. We were old. And we would soon watch ourselves during the special 40th anniversary screening, would hear the audience laugh and cheer every outrageous kill, recite particular lines of dialogue, while we slunk lower in our designated row, feeling the loss beyond the blood. Even when flayed, our skin was glorious.

"I didn't want you to die," he tells me.

"You were watching the wrong movie then," I say.

"But my dad knew you were going to get it," he says.

"Dads," I say.

"I've come from Topeka," he says.

"That's a long trip," I say.

"But I don't live in Topeka," he says.

"Oh," I say.

"I just flew from there," he says.

"Right," I say.

"To be here," he says.

"Oh, well, welcome," I say as though I represent the chamber of commerce and I hope he will enjoy his stay in our fair city. I don't live here myself. Not anymore. Not since my downtown days when things were fun and strange, when being irresponsible had this varnish of liberation. I was braver back then. I recall being fierce and for the most part lucky. I ran in circles that ran in circles with semi-famous people—Patti Smith, Willem Dafoe, David Byrne—until their centrifugal force threw me into more obscure corners. I also burned some bridges. This is standard-issue nostalgia, while in front of me looms someone who seems congested with an undiagnosed dairy allergy. I notice his breath. It smells of feet. Like his tongue is barefoot in his sneaker mouth. "So what's your name?" I ask.

He thinks for a moment, then he says, "Bob."

"Bob?"

"Yes," Bob says, "Bob."

"Okay, Bob it is." I orient the photo against my looming Sharpie. The organizers came up with these publicity stills, which are retrofitted for the cause since *Night's Scream* had neither the budget nor the prestige to warrant an on-set photographer. And certainly nobody asked my permission, or my opinion, on the particular image used. I had signed away my rights for $500 and was frankly amused by the opportunity, having already debased myself multiple times for free. So there I am, drunk and fritzed on Quaaludes since this is late May in Maine and Terry Lester has pumped me with whatever might keep me pliable. But I'm messing up my entrance via freezing water, like the Lady of the Lake's slutty sister, which Terry is treating as the most important shot in his dumb movie—me trying again and again in sheer panties and child-sized T-shirt, Terry screaming, me on the verge of hypothermia though the crew has diagnosed my distress as spoiled-bitch syndrome. Only Charlie Mooks cares. Between takes he warms me in his meaty, mole-flecked arms, his pulsing midsection giving me the dick version of CPR. "There, there," he says, as he rubs my back. He's stoned and has been offering me mushrooms whenever we're alone. But the truth is, I have never looked as good as I look in this photo. It's undeniable. I can see the longing in my eyes and, buried deep, the electric rage that tightens the focus into the brutalized woman the world wants me to be. I'm staring at the assholes on the shore, all of them amateur sadists. I am alone, and I am dying, and I am beautiful. Plus my body is perfect. Like absurdly perfect. I'm also four weeks from learning I'm pregnant. Maybe this is why I'm glowing. Or maybe I'm investing myself with meaning. Searching for signs and symbols. Tania inside me holding on for dear life. Oh sweetie, I think, for her and for me, as I land the Sharpie on my forehead and write *For* and inscribe *Bob* across my breasts. I add below, *Don't come inside me, okay?* Which is cribbed from my last line of dialogue. That always gets them grinning. Then I finish with the flourish of *Zoe Palindromos.* This handle was foisted on me during my days in the art-slash-club scene, when queer men threatened pretty girls with stardom. Their homosexuality stood in for integrity. Eventually they fed us to photographers.

"Here you go"—I pause so I can land his name—"Bob."

In many ways I am still an actress.

Bob admires the photo. "You're my favorite here," he tells me.

"Oh, thanks," I say.

"I really hate when you die," Bob says.

"Yeah," I say, "but here I am."

Then Bob half-whispers, "I know your real name."

"Do you?" I say.

He nods. "Zoe Akeldama, from Massapequa, Long Island."

I remain cool and say, "*Ding ding ding.*"

"And then you were Zoe Lobeki, and then Zoe Marston, and now Zoe Newhart who lives in Dos Rios Triangle, Sacramento." Bob says this like he's in on the joke even though there's no identifiable joke. And while I know I exist on Wikipedia, on IMDb, on Fangoria and other websites dedicated to the horror genre, I have no idea how deep I might sink in the internet, how far this Bob character can reach into me. Political donations? Real estate transactions? Lawsuits filed? Has he hacked my Facebook page? My Instagram? Does he know that my irises are blooming?

"Well," I say, "thanks for coming," and I straighten up and regard the people waiting behind him, hoping they might provide relief. But they are more of the same. The zombie. The space alien. The amputee turning his loss into kicky special effect. The people in normal clothes appear even more sinister. I notice the rare young woman dressed in denim shorts and tank top—the kind of outfit I wore the night I was slaughtered. Who knows how this particular girl will be savaged? By spear? By pitchfork? By blunt force trauma via rock or log or whatever else is handy and vicious? If she is me, she can expect the kitchen knife across her throat while she's on top of her jock boyfriend—really fucking him good, as Terry commanded, like the best fuck of his life. It was night and we were in the woods, on a mattress hidden by ferns, and I remember the crew on the other side, their shabby voyeurism like the atmospheric disturbance before lightning—charged and obscurely dangerous yet impossible to really fear. Brad was beneath me, sweet Brad, who died of AIDS in the early 1990s. He was so nervous. And I wanted to make our moment seem real, wanted those pricks watching us to feel our brief humanity, so I improvised and told Brad not to come inside me, in order to ground things, to express our authenticity, while Charlie Mooks approached from behind, his massive blur stepping into donkey-masked distinction. The rest is well-known: Charlie grabs my chin and slits my throat. Blood pours down my chest, over my bare breasts—like tainted milk, as the script described. And then Charlie pushes me on top of Brad and turns us into his macabre bucking bronco—*hee-haw, hee-haw*—until Brad comes despite the awfulness from above. My postmortem is his postcoital. Brad would get his later, when he rushed and attacked Charlie with an ax. Lord, what fools these mortals be.

Bob reaches into his canvas satchel.

"I have something else for you," he says.

I'm expecting the *Night's Scream* poster, or the VHS tape, or even the PLAYBOY from after the movie was released. Those photos predate my cinematic debut, taken under the guise of the anti-artistic artistic nude, meaning raw and ordinary, meaning Harry Englander appreciated my unshaved armpits and my knees casually spread apart. I have signed all varieties of myself today. I have been a good sport, I think.

"Okay," I say.

But instead of these things, Bob places in front of me a yearbook. The cover is white with a series of curved strata, red and orange and yellow, bulging from a rounded core, like the geological representation of an eyeball. After a moment I realize what this is—the *Sachem* from 1972—and I gasp loud enough for Charlie Mooks to glance over.

Bob is pleased. "I collect them," he says, "yearbooks of famous people."

I smile and tell Bob I'm hardly famous. I open the yearbook near the middle and am immediately greeted by era-specific hair. Us girls have long feathery manes, parted in the middle, framing faces beaming and wide. Our heads seem to tilt under the uniform weight. I had forgotten about this trend, or rather, had forgotten about the ubiquity of this trend. It's staggering. I can practically smell the Prell. The boys have a bit more variation. There are a few short-haired Republican types—hello, Ryan Nellows—but even they are weedy around the edges, while the rest fall within the shoulder-length dude category. I'm struck by my instant familiarity with names and associated personalities. Kirsten Lee. Veronica Lemon. Anthony Looper. Every photo is like a paused frame of film. I can see Anthony's dimples deepen, Kirsten twirling her hair. "This is amazing," I say.

Bob reaches forward and turns a few pages. "There," he says.

I look for me but I am not there.

Then Bob points to a picture, bottom right.

I see a boy with a toothy smile and bushy black hair, like a mink hat with ear flaps.

"Jerry Seinfeld," Bob says.

Of course. Jerome Seinfeld. Right near Barbara Schein and Amy Schmidt. Jerry whom I hardly knew, yet I catch his smile corkscrewing into a smirk. There is post-1972 writing nearby—*To Bob, Thanks for the blast from the past, Jerry Seinfeld*—which streaks across Barbara and Amy like bratty graffiti.

"I got him to sign this a few years ago," Bob says.

"Uh-huh," I say.

"He got a real kick out of it," Bob says.

"I bet," I say.

"Do you know him?" Bob asks.

"Not really," I say. "It was a big school."

Bob then flips toward the beginning of the senior pictures and finds me nestled between Linda Abate and Roger Aledort. I am a cataract of pure blonde hair though I lack the easy smile of my classmates and instead edge toward mystery. But I was legend at Massapequa High. Jerome Seinfeld would've remembered me—they all would've remembered Zoe Akeldama. But I was too aloof to be popular, confusing beauty with maturity, and when I was done with the school, I was done with these people. But seeing this picture is like seeing a missing person posted on a milk carton or a post office bulletin board, flashed on the six o'clock news, like something awful has happened and this is evidence of more innocent days. And it isn't just me. All the boys seem killed in Vietnam, all the girls murdered in the woods. The class of 1972 might as well be decomposing under groovy hair.

"There I am," I say.

I think of Tania, how she might see herself in my skeptical eyes, my dubious grin.

"You were a happy accident," Bob tells me. "I was going through the yearbook, just looking at the pictures, when I came across yours, and I was like, I think I know her, and then I was like, it's the girl from *Night's Scream*. I've seen the movie like a thousand times."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"And I thought, how cool to have both your autographs," Bob says.

"Sure," I say.

I'm holding the Sharpie over myself, wondering where to sign and what to write, when a thought comes to mind: Maybe I could keep the yearbook for the rest of the day; maybe over dinner I could show Tania this teenage glimpse of myself; maybe we could squeeze in an early laugh and this would loosen things up between us. She might even regard me with more humanity and less suspicion. Look, I could say, I was young once. I was not born your mother. So I ask Bob if there's any chance he might lend me the *Sachem,* just for the night, and afterward I could leave the yearbook with the front desk of my hotel. "My daughter would really get a kick out of this," I tell him.

Bob's face practically contorts in pain.

"Um," he says.

"I promise I'll leave it there."

"It's just——"

"I can give you my phone number, just in case," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Sure," I say, and I grab the already signed photo of myself and write on the back the name of my hotel and my phone number. I realize how this must look, and so I glance up and smile, but Bob seems to be checking the numbers against the numbers he already has scratched in his head. I notice Charlie Mooks's continued sideways curiosity. I wonder if he still thinks of me, if he envisions this Bob character strung up by the legs, a chain saw ready to split him in half.

"Thanks so much," I say. "I really appreciate it."

Bob takes the photo and reinspects the information. "You promise?" he asks.

"I promise," I say.

He slips the photograph back into his satchel. "Okay," he says.

"Okay," I say.

"Bye," he says.

"Bye," I say.

Bob turns and heads back into the crowd, his hand resting on the hilt of his machete, as though he might need to cut his way through these other versions of himself.

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Throughout the afternoon my phone buzzes with texts from Bob reconfirming the address of the hotel, the time of pickup tomorrow, or maybe tonight, *buzz, buzz, buzz,* and I text back my assurances in as few words as possible. But I'm amused. By five o'clock the cast of *Night's Scream* is done with our commitments, and we gather back in the green room to collect our belongings. The performance of the last five hours has left me gutted, as well as embarrassed for myself. All that smiling. The fake pleasant words. The put-on enthusiasm. I feel even more distant from myself than normal, like my head is floating on a string. But the others seem invigorated by the residual fame. I do my best to linger and participate in their small talk, but the purpose of our being together fast evaporates and I get clammy in their company. I need fresh air. I need escape. I have no bygone fondness for these people. I'm like a pair of scissors saying good-bye.

Charlie Mooks insists on a hug. I can smell his deodorant fighting against the odor of wet leaves, and I think of myself rotting inside his massive bag of flesh. He squeezes me tight. I can sense his hard-on underneath—or the memory of his hard-on. "We're so glad you came," he says as he presses into my dead self.

"Me too," I lie.

"Hope to see you at one of these things again," he says.

"Yes," I say, knowing I will never do this again.

Charlie releases me, and I grab my things and wave a final good-bye. The rest of the gang are going for a drink, maybe multiple drinks, ha-ha-ha. Once I'm gone I know they will anatomize me, will compare me to the person I was back in Maine. How I paraded about. How I suffered. How I was the victim long before any blade crossed my throat. I can already hear them taking me apart. Dragging me to the ground. But at least I know I hated them first. Amy in her ridiculous red hat. Laura in her tacky vintage dress. Karen with her résumé on parade, how her life has never been better, how blessed she is, in her cheap Talbots blouse, the underarms pitted through.

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Back in my hotel room I freshen up and then head uptown for dinner with Tania. There have been no new texts from Bob since the initial volley. In the taxi I send him a single period, imagining his reaction. Mistake or meaning? A pip of dust on the screen? But there is no reply, no indecisive ellipsis. Nothing. And I'm briefly worried for Bob. Is he doing all right in the big city? I arrive at the restaurant early. It's near Tania's apartment. I had hoped she was going to invite me over beforehand so I could get a glimpse of her life, but she had insisted on just meeting here—so here I am, drinking sparkling water when what I want is vodka. The restaurant seems to cater to the solo diner. Framed museum posters cover the walls. Sheets of white paper stand in for tablecloths. Having a reservation feels somewhat humiliating. This is hardly the special night I had imagined. Plus I'm a picky eater.

For distraction, I take the *Sachem* from my shoulder bag. The inside cover tells me the yearbook belonged to Paul Fatone. I have no recollection of Paul Fatone. His photograph sparks nothing but another assault of hairstyle molded against white suburban face. But Paul Fatone must have been popular. There are scrawls everywhere from fellow seniors, the innocuous words of teenagers using the lingo of the day. They inscribe their parting gibes as though on a piece of novelty tombstone, the earth beneath forever summer. I search for a few old flames. Nathan Lobo. Bill Ferguson. Toby Stankowski. None of them lasted for more than a month before they disappointed me, and while I gave myself easily—Ryan Feller took my virginity in ninth grade—I departed just as easily and enjoyed the notion of their pining, even enjoyed the gossip afterward. I

liked being talked about even if every word stung. And I would give my own details to the girls, how the boys' dicks were small and their performance sweaty and quick, how the only good part was when they let me harvest the pimples on their backs. And then I would go and screw another boy to further remove meaning. It was free love but with a nihilistic stain. On page 75 I come across my only close girlfriend, Sally Gimble. By graduation she was no longer speaking to me, which was fine since I knew from the beginning we had an expiration date. A few years ago I searched for her on Facebook. She still lives in Massapequa and is married with two sons. I didn't bother with the friend request. Her boys looked like rapists.

The front door of the restaurant opens and I see Tania—my Tania, my baby girl, right there. The sight of her fills me to the tips of my fingers and toes. It's like I have ballast again. I straighten and lift my chin toward the light of our reunion. She must see me—I can see her, but first she says hello to the maître d', this French crone, the two of them exchanging a European-style kiss. I wonder how often Tania eats here. Does she have her normal spot at the bar, where Jules or Maurice or Emile serves her too sweet white wine? Tania and the crone laugh, Tania with her hand on the crone's shoulder. I want to wave but I won't. I'll let her have this moment. Tania looks the same and yet different since I saw her five years ago: the Christmas visit before she went to San Francisco for New Year's. Just two days with me during which half the time she was sleeping. And I gave her wonderful gifts. She gave me a scarf. Tania seems more middle-aged now. Rounder. Her hair has remained short but is dyed a brighter lollipop red. She looks like her father if her father was transitioning to a woman. Her fashion sense appears based on taking long flights—loose-fitting clothes, sandals, a backpack. A walk through a security checkpoint seems implied. There are probably two paperbacks in that backpack. And a *Playbill* for a matinee. And some sort of sour candy loose from its wrapper, shedding its dust. And a gratitude journal where she keeps track of what she's thankful for, from friends to foods to television shows to masturbating in the bathtub. There's no Mom in there—oh, and catalogs of dreams, conscious and unconscious, described over endless pages. I almost feel sorry for her. She's probably speaking bad French right now.

Tania finally breaks free from the front of the restaurant and comes toward me. Her smile tightens, withholding the fullness of expression, no doubt because I am her mother, and so I offer her the same expression in return. I remain seated and formal. Like a great-aunt. Because this is what she wants. I notice her quick examination of my face—the wrinkles and age spots, the blondish scars on my nose and forehead from the basal cell carcinoma. I feel tattooed by those eyes. She still refuses to pluck those black hairs from that mole on her chin. I have tweezers in my bag, but I'll refrain from saying anything.

"Mom," she says, spreading her arms, "you're here!" She was once a child actress.

"Hello, sweetheart," I say.

"Back in the big city," she says as she takes her seat.

"Well, first time I've been invited," I say.

Tania does that Tania thing with her lips. "How was the event?" she asks.

"It was a convention," I say.

"Right, horror movie stuff," she says.

"Well, yes, all sorts of cinema really, and people were very excited we were there. It really was something. You should've come. A bigger crowd than I imagined. Lines and lines of people. My hand is wrecked from signing things," I tell her, showing her my hand.

"Very cool," Tania says. "And was it fun seeing everyone from the cast again?"

"Not really," I say. "Charlie Mooks sells insurance."

"Who's he again?" Tania asks.

"The killer," I say.

"Right right right," Tania says.

"He's even more disgusting today," I say.

"Oh," Tania says.

"And everyone just seems so old," I say, "including myself."

"Please," Tania says, who seems almost older than me.

"And even worse," I tell her, "we had to watch ourselves during the screening, up there on the big screen, when we were all so young and beautiful and worthy enough to be slaughtered by a madman."

Tania grins.

"What?" I ask.

"That's funny," she says.

"Maybe you can't understand," I say.

Tania sits back in her chair. "Yeah, maybe," she says.

"It's just strange," I say, "seeing ourselves all fresh-faced and pert. It's like watching an old home movie but with horrible graphic violence."

"Uh-huh," Tania says.

"Anyway, it was a long hellish day. Literally. Like I saw visions from hell." I glance around the restaurant and cannot help the next line—it's practically dictated by inevitable forces. "Speaking of hell, do you enjoy this neighborhood? Because when I lived in the city it was all about downtown. SoHo. East Village. The Upper West Side was considered, I don't know, sleepy and dull," I say.

Tania readjusts her napkin. "Don't think that's changed much," she says.

"I remember——"

The waiter shows up. He places his hand on Tania's shoulder and Tania beams.

"Hello, beautiful," he says.

"*Bonsoir,* George," Tania says.

I'm almost embarrassed for her.

"Where have you been hiding, my lovely?" George asks. He must be in his late 50s and he's attractive in the way waiters can sometimes be attractive: attentive and clean and conscious of posture and purpose. He has a mustache, which I normally hate, except on the rare occasion when they transcend my bias and become mysteriously powerful. George has such a mustache.

"Traveling," Tania tells him.

"To exotic lands?" George asks.

"Buffalo," Tania says.

I smile at Tania; I smile at George; I smile at Tania and George.

"I hear it's magical this time of year," George says.

"I did see Niagara Falls," Tania says.

"And?" George asks.

"Pretty great. Went on the *Maid of the Mist,*" Tania says.

I keep smiling, at Tania, at George, at Tania and George.

"Is there a better name?" George says. "*Maid of the Mist,*" he repeats with a flourish.

"It was beyond," Tania says. "The sound. The power. Like a glacier but all movement."

"A glacier moves," George says.

"But very slowly," Tania says.

"Until all at once," George says, making a calving gesture with his hands.

Finally Tania notices me, or remembers I'm in this scene as well.

"George," she says, "this is my mother."

George turns to me. "Hello, Tania's mother," he says.

"Zoe," I say.

George's mustache arches like an eyebrow. "Ah, Greek for life," he says.

"Yes," I say, though I never trust when service people know these kinds of things, or I find the idea of their deeper knowledge somewhat unsettling. It's like seeing someone handsome who works on a road crew—it does not jibe with my worldview. "So what are the specials, George?" I ask, sticking to the menu.

"The specials?" George asks.

"Yes," I say.

"Everything is special," George says with inclusive gusto.

"Okay, great, but what are the specials really?" I ask again.

"Just what's on the menu," George says. "The lamb is very good."

Tania blushes. I'm guessing she's a regular consumer of the lamb.

"I'll have the lamb then," I say, handing back the menu.

Tania looks surprised. "We're doing this already?" she asks.

"Why not?" I say. "George is here, and he seems ready and capable and even eager, and it's been a long day, and I'm hungry, and I hear the lamb is very good, and that's just fine by me. Oh, and I'll have another sparkling water as well and maybe some bread."

"Okay," George says. "And you, Tania?"

"Um, I guess I'll have the chicken paillard," she says. "And I'll stick with regular water."

"Excellent," George says, and he executes a shallow bow before leaving.

There's a moment of post-ordering silence before I say, "He seems nice."

"Uh-huh," Tania says.

"You come here often?" I ask.

"Enough," Tania says.

"Is he maybe your boyfriend?" I ask, which I know is a supremely foolish thing to ask, and yet the words are released before I can do anything, spoken from this voice within my voice, like a stage prompt from the wings.

Tania tilts her head. "What?" she asks.

"Is he your boyfriend?" I repeat because I'm stubborn with the newfound attention.

"Um, no," Tania says, "he's not my boyfriend."

"It's just, he's cute," I say.

"Stop," Tania says.

"I thought you two had some repartee," I say.

"Can we change the subject?" Tania asks.

"You obviously get along."

"Stop," Tania says.

"Okay," I say as though uncertain of the ground rules. "So, Niagara Falls…."

"And not that either," Tania says.

And so begins the back-and-forth of mothers and daughters immemorial. Everything I ask is too personal; everything I say is too banal to warrant a proper response. And Tania gives me the minimum, mostly yeses and nos and a few spare details—her job, her friends, her rescue dog—which hardly defrays the general sense of sadness and loneliness I imagine from her life. The poor girl. She speaks as if she has a lawyer present, glancing to the side when I pose basic questions, seeking, it seems, counsel from David Hockney at MoMA. And she can barely muster any curiosity about my own day-to-day existence and instead seeks confirmation of the same old, same old, as though I'm not real, as though I am merely someone in prosthetics acting as her mother. And she once adored me. Would practically dress up as me. I flatten in the chair. Whatever misguided enthusiasm is leaking away, moldering and stale, like my love is just the reek of my own breath.

I NEED FRESH AIR. I NEED ESCAPE. I HAVE NO BYGONE FONDNESS FOR THESE PEOPLE. I'M LIKE A PAIR OF SCISSORS SAYING GOOD-BYE.

"Have you seen your father?" I ask, raising the stakes, but I need fuller consideration.

"Of course not," Tania says.

"I was just wondering," I say, "since you're both in the city."

"Why would I see him?" she asks.

"I don't know. Don't blame me for that," I say.

"I don't want to see him," Tania says. "At all. Like never."

"Okay," I say.

At some point George appears with the food.

"Here's the lamb. And the chicken," he says.

I look up at him and say, "I'm curious, George, are you married?"

Tania tightens from across the table.

"No," George says.

"Never?" I ask.

Tania leans forward. I am finally fully present in her eyes.

"I'm a widower," George says.

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. When did your wife die?" I ask.

"Um, Mom," Tania says.

George smiles despite himself. "About three years ago," he says.

"And how did she die, if you don't mind me asking?" I ask.

"Mom," Tania says again.

George nods like a boat on waves. "Cancer," he says,

"Mom," Tania says, "stop."

"There's no shame in this," I say to her. "Just an honest and open conversation, right, George? I myself am a survivor. Basal cell carcinoma." I point to the various divots on my face. "And a nasty squamous cell carcinoma on my back. Fair skin and a love of bikinis, not a good combination. Certainly not the same, of course, not by a long shot, but still gets you thinking. I also had a thyroid scare last year. I don't know if I told you that, Tania."

"Enough," Tania says.

"It was in her brain," George says. "Or started there."

"How horrible for you," I say.

"Yes, well, mostly horrible for her," George says, his head back on the shore.

"I can't imagine," I say, though I can.

"Anyway," George says, "bon appétit," which rings hollow yet true.

"Yes, thank you, George," I say. "Looks delicious. Thank you."

I regard the lamb in front of me. I hate lamb.

In five minutes, maybe six, Tania will get up and leave. I know this like I know she can sometimes cry so hard that she'll vomit. Like I know she can hold her breath almost to the point of fainting. Like I know she can stay locked in the bathroom until the fire department has to be called. Her face is reddening now. Blotches appear on her neck and chest, like her skin is litmus paper and I am the test. She never could hide anything from me. She holds her knife and fork like handlebars and she's speeding downhill, reckless and strong-willed, running away from home again. I notice the votive candle on the table flickering. George has forgotten the bread. I start in on the lamb, cutting and then inspecting the meat. It's like I'm performing an autopsy. I realize there's a specific word for what the flame is doing, which suddenly seems important to remember. Flicker, flutter, shiver, shudder. I keep my eyes focused on the plate, on the growing pile of excised meat. All of the restaurant seems constituted around our silence and the predestined end of our silence. We are the main event. Twinkle, sparkle, glimmer. I sound like a witch in my head. If only Tania knew how much I loved her. Gutter—the flame is guttering. That's when I look up and give Tania a satisfied smile. I never even had the chance to mention the yearbook.

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The bar at the hotel is hardly full, which is both a relief and a disappointment, and yet the bartender lingers on the opposite end, chatting with others while I embarrass myself with a series of meaningful glances. Perhaps he's trying to instill some dismissive cool onto the place. Because otherwise this could be a New York–themed restaurant in Des Moines. And the lighting is beyond hideous. My pores seem possessed by lampreys, angry and alive, sucking up the fluorescence. I'm sure everyone can hear my skin scream. But nobody turns toward me, not even the nearby older gentleman in his dated pinstripe suit. He's around my age. His hair is thinning and slicked back, his scalp vaguely corpse-like. Forty years ago his attention would've angled toward me in a near instant. Shoulders followed by head followed by eyes. The testing of the space between us. The unavoidable hello. But he's only interested in his phone, and I'm still waiting for the bartender. Billy Joel plays on the stereo. Then the Ramones. It's as though the playlist has been created by a schizophrenic New Yorker.

I take a deep breath, which spurs an extravagant yawn.

I imagine a pair of clear blue eyes peering from my throat.

"Fuck," I say as I finish the yawn.

The older gentleman looks at me.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," I say.

He extends me a thumbs-up and returns to his phone.

Once again I glance down the bar.

Does the bartender think I already have a drink?

I reach into my bag and grab the *Sachem*—the goddamn *Sachem,* and I find myself sort of laughing, because it's been a long and impossible day and here I am in this hotel bar listening to "I Wanna Be Sedated" and as far as I can tell I barely exist in this world. I open the yearbook and find Zoe Akeldama. I should sign the thing already. *For Bob. Dear Bob. Sweet Bob.* And though I have a pen in my bag, I think about asking the older gentleman for one, just to confirm my reality. Oh, excuse me, sir. My mother once told me she would have named me Athena if she had known just how beautiful I would become. So typical that she had gotten the goddess wrong. But her life was so meager. The dental hygienist. The first-generation American. The paltry success story. Zoe Akeldama would have gotten a drink here no problem. And whatever drug she wanted. And a weekend trip to someplace warm. And a stupid role in a stupid movie, which was always the stupid dream. I carefully rip the page from the yearbook, like removing a check from a checkbook. The older gentleman looks at me again. I smile and ball the piece of paper and toss it in the direction of the bartender. It hardly causes a stir.

"That was me," I tell the older gentleman.

His extends me another thumbs-up and returns to his phone.

This is New York, I think. This is me in New York. This is me sitting here in New York.

I look at my hands. Always a mistake.

I'm tempted to grab my tweezers and work on random knuckle hairs but instead I pick up my phone.

No new texts; no new e-mails.

Nothing.

Four middle-aged women enter the bar, probably 20 years younger than me. They seem to be celebrating something, their festivity instantly grating. They semaphore whooping with their arms. No doubt they will all order cosmopolitans and be further transformed.

I think about Bob. I think about Bob roaming the streets in his fedora and faux machete, playing the character he always wanted to be, but the tall buildings are almost overwhelming, the crowds and the lights, the sudden sounds, all the fears greater than any moth streaking toward him in the moonlight. And yet Bob persists, Bob does the sights, Bob eats a pretzel and a hot dog, Bob goes into Madame Tussauds and poses next to Freddy Krueger and Frank Sinatra, Bob navigates these mysterious scenes and wonders where all these people live and how they live and what they do for a living, Bob assuming he's the only stranger here, the only audience member to this curious show. Then he gets three texts in quick succession. Like whispers through a crannied hole.

"Come to Room 2024."

"Come right now."

"I have what you want." ■

The Islander

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ANA DIAS**

STYLING BY KELLEY ASH

JUNE PLAYMATE

*Join **Yoli Lara,** our June Playmate, on a tour of her native Puerto Rico and her radiant spirit*

MY ISLAND IS EVERYTHING TO ME.

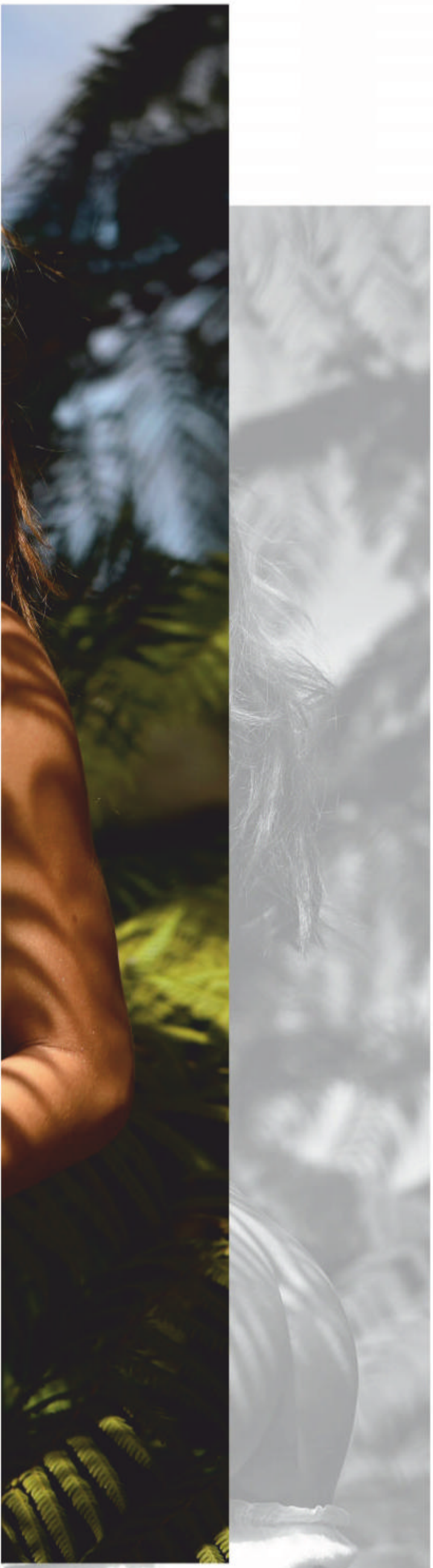
When Hurricane Maria hit back in 2017, it was devastating to my hometown of Toa Baja, which is on the outskirts of San Juan and right near the beach. I was living and working as a model in Los Angeles at the time. I wanted to go home immediately and help my family and my people put the pieces back together, and I had an idea how I could make the biggest impact. I told my mom, "I'm moving back, and I'm going to compete for Miss Puerto Rico in the Miss Universe pageant." My mom said, "You're crazy—you're already established in Los Angeles. Why do you want to come back to the island?" I told her, "I want to use that platform to say something and for people to hear me."

I moved back to Puerto Rico the following April. Nobody in the industry knew me, and I'd never done a pageant in my life. While I was there, I worked with Waves for Water, a nonprofit that was installing handmade water filters all over the island. They sponsored a project I did for the pageant: One of the schools in my hometown didn't have any water, so we installed a cooler and did a presentation where we ran dirty water through the filter so it was totally clean. They do wonderful work, and I was blessed that they helped me use that experience in the pageant.

Winning Miss Puerto Rico would have been a dream, but it wasn't in the cards for me. Around the time of the pageant, my modeling agency in Los Angeles dropped me because I wasn't there. (Luckily, they ended up giving me a second chance.) When I came back here, I had nothing; I had given up everything to go back home. It was frightening, but I didn't care. I gave 110 percent of myself, and even though I didn't win I felt like a winner with everything I had done—the pageant, the rebuilding, everything.

And if I *had* won, I wouldn't have been able to do this story! It wasn't even two weeks after I got back to Los Angeles that PLAYBOY contacted me. I remember thinking, This is it—my validation. If I work hard and treat people with respect, the universe follows through. I said yes because I think any chance a woman gets to showcase her power is a great opportunity.

I didn't get this opportunity because I look the way I look; there are 10,000 girls who are more beautiful than I am, who have all the things a magazine would be lucky to have. I got this opportunity because I have something to say. I fell down, I got up. Even though one door closed, it doesn't matter, because down the road I'm going to have a good time. That's what I want people to say at the end of my journey: "She did it."



I didn't get this opportunity because I look the way I look. I got it because I have something to say.

DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: Bayamón, Puerto Rico **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

ON HAPPY PLACES

For me, the beach is everything. I'm an Aquarius, and my full first name has the ocean in it—the *mar* in *Yolimar*. I was born on an island, so I feel very tied to the ocean. Most people are like, "Oh, we're going to the beach!" But for me it's a spiritual, cleansing adventure.

ON CAUTIONARY EXAMPLES

I was very influenced by Disney movies. My favorite is *Pocahontas* because she stays with her family and her tribe; she doesn't live her dream. When I saw that story I was like, "No. Even though it will kill me in my heart, I want to reach for my dreams." I left Puerto Rico and all my family; I knew I had to step out of my comfort zone.

ON PAIN AND GAIN

Growing up, I couldn't see my mom that much because she worked full-time, so I spent a lot of time with my grandma. She would braid my hair for school, fixing it in two little pigtails. It hurt so much! My hair is really curly, and she would make those braids so tight. But they were always intact, even at six P.M. when I returned from school. I always looked fabulous, thanks to her.

ON OPPORTUNITY

I did my first photo shoot when I was 14. They were looking for models for a hair show, and I remember my mom saying, "You're *not* going to dye your hair." But I knew I would take the opportunity. They wanted to dye my hair blonde with streaks of red and orange—very futuristic. I said, "Let's do it. Whatever it is, let's *do* it." I went to school the next day and got sent right back home—literally, walk in, walk out.

ON REJECTION

I wasn't a conventional model; like all the women in my family, I have a tiny waist and big hips. I'm used to it now, but at those early castings I would always hear, "You're perfect, but your hips are too big." I would be like, "I can't do anything about it, because that's literally how my body is. I can't just grow or shrink." I learned that the job entails rejection.

ON PROGRESS

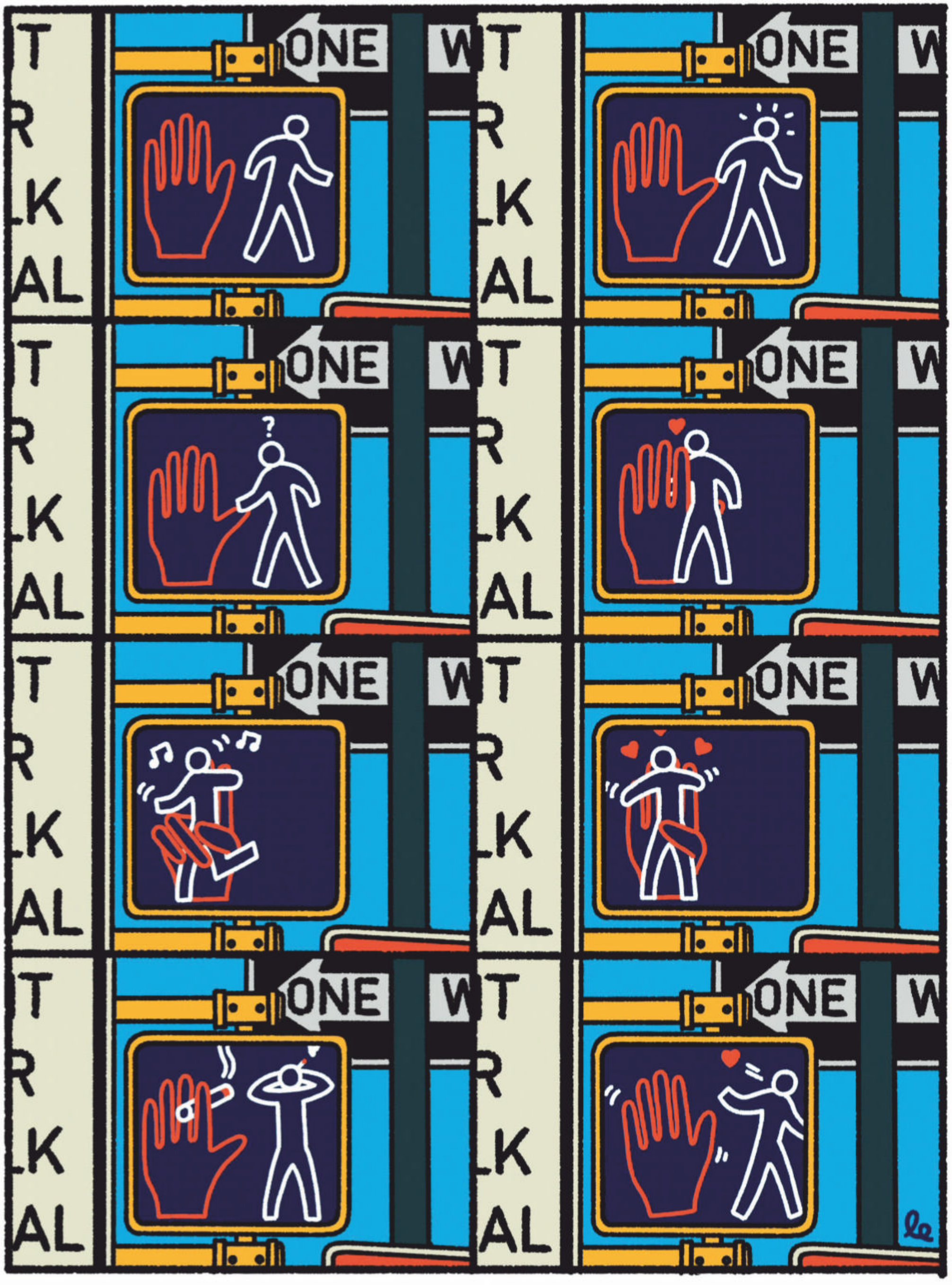
I'm grateful that industries now are more inclusive regarding race, shape, size, color and gender. I think people are more open to change and diversity and to accepting different things.

ON RIRI

Rihanna is one of my idols. She's from Barbados and was discovered on the island. She sings, she dances, she does it all—and she has a tiny waist and big hips. When I was growing up I would watch her singing "Umbrella" and say, "I want to be like her."

JUNE 2019 PLAYMATE

JUNE 2019 PLAYMATE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THE PLAYBOY
SYMPOSIUM

GUEST EDITED BY **EVAN PRICCO**

Playboy taps JUXTAPOZ's editor in chief to assemble a special multimedia exploration of art, freedom and activism. Here, six rising artists present works that further conversations and ignite new ones

It's amazing how, in the not so distant past, some of the best American art decorated your neighborhood post office. And perhaps even more surprising is the fact that this idea—that tax dollars should be used to make art a part of daily life—was a mandate from the U.S. government.

Under the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, or WPA, which in turn created the Federal Art Project, the government prioritized putting art to work. Of course the United States wasn't the first country to do so; just about any civilization you can name has a history of beautiful public architecture, but for Depression-era America it was a declaration of confidence and creativity. The country needed to make a name for itself on the global art stage, and the local post office was going to help it get there. So if you went to the mail drop in Kellogg, Idaho in 1941, you would see the mural *Discovery* by the then emerging American artist Fletcher Martin hanging above the postmaster's door.

These days, art, especially in connection to politics, looks less like it did during the heyday of the WPA and more like an extension of grassroots protest and advocacy. You could argue that artists, designers, musicians and poets spread creative capital for Barack Obama throughout the 2008 presidential campaign—so much so that many believed Shepard Fairey's *Hope* posters had been bankrolled by the candidate. What originated as an organic image became the emblem of a world in which art and politics could exist hand in hand.

The government may not have been paying for the arts, but in some ways, the transformative political experience that we saw with Fairey's *Hope* helped spawn a new movement. Run the clock forward to the 2016 election, and one can't forget how a particular candidate sparked perhaps the most outrageous protest art America has seen, with "Make America Great Again." That candidate—inspired, perhaps unwittingly, by 20th century masters of the propaganda poster—ended up increasing the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts after threatening for more than a year to gut its programs. I swear he did it by accident.

In an era when there seems to be a constant struggle to identify what America is, or should be, art reflects the moment and at the same time fights against the notion of singularity. Those early WPA organizers understood that art in daily life was a necessary condition for healthy discourse. As we have collectively stepped away from this federally sanctioned practice, the myth of our unified identity has become evident.

There's a reason public art is so popular—why we have art in doctors' offices and airports and on city streets; why many psychologists say art programs in prisons are a kind of therapy. Art makes you feel, dare I say...good? But for so many years art has been associated with the left wing, with antiauthoritarianism—as seen in everything from the Black Panthers' poster art to Barbara Kruger's anticonsumerist wordplay and even Fairey's Obama work. The most daring art tends to be linked to protest, and many in power would probably prefer those works to be inaccessible to a wider audience.

Art has been displaced in our culture, but the artists in this feature are developing new ways to examine our greater selfhood in an era of disruption. Their art is made with personal and societal implications in mind. Some of it comes from the heart of the justice system, a full turn from the origins of the WPA.

These artists don't create art for art's sake. Their works aren't sharks in formaldehyde—fascinating yet so ostentatious that their meaning is lost in spectacle. This is a look at those who are creating monuments to living, breathing connection in times of discord—and something for us to live with.

MIRANDA BARNES

BOTH IMAGES: *LORRAINE MOTEL, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE.* MEDIUM-FORMAT FILM ON NEWSPAPER, 2018

A true understanding of activism came to me first with the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and then in 2014 with those of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

I feared for my younger brothers, my father, my friends and any black man in this country who could be subjected to violence and have his death played out in the media so widely and publicly. I feared for myself, as a young black woman, and the thought that I would eventually have black children.

Those years solidified my choice to attend John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City and eventually graduate with a B.A. in humanities and justice, in 2018. I also came to the realization that the art world lacked stories like mine, so I started to take my photography more seriously and document topics I believe in. I felt a responsibility as a black photographer to highlight the black narrative missing from the mainstream landscape. That conviction remains to this day.

The two photos on these pages are from my coverage for *The New York Times* of the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. I chose them because I believe that what King achieved in his short time here is the epitome of activism. He carried the burden and the stress of millions of black Americans, championing equality for all.

These images, I hope, serve as a reminder that at the same time King was a legend, he was also a father, husband, brother and friend. Despite his status and accomplishments, at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, he was still a black man gunned down in America.

Barnes is a Caribbean–Anglo American photographer whose work challenges racial stereotypes.

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YRSA DALEY-WARD

I Have a Friend

I have a friend who *means* well. She comes to see me often and brings candles, sweets and sage. At the end of the night on the town she'll say, "text when you're home safe, babe."

Strange then, that when it happened,

when it happened, and I told her she said,

'Why were you there alone? You know what he's like.'

I have a friend who 'means well.' She knows how to soothe things like depression (golden root, blueberries, orange scent) and will always want to celebrate your birthday—but when there's a man in the room she jokes about your faults.

I have a friend who means *well, so well,* but doesn't trust anyone around her boyfriend; will laugh out loud at his bad manners, will make excuses for his hate, will placate, will rearrange our plans together if he suddenly has a free night. I have a friend who knows herself and forgets herself in a blink. A friend that says things like *Yeah, but I'm sure she provoked him.* I've got a well-meaning, dear soon to be *not friend* who says *not all men,* and, *men will be men...*

but my man would never.

I love my friend. My friend who says *what did she do what did she drink look what she wore what does she think she is?* I love my friend. I love my friend, but it's over.

Daley-Ward is a writer of mixed West Indian and West African heritage whose most celebrated works include a memoir, The Terrible, and a collection of poems, Bone.

NATHANIEL MARY QUINN

THE MAKING OF SUPER NIGGA. MIXED MEDIA ON VELLUM, 50 X 38 INCHES, 2015

Consider the history of the treatment of black and brown folks in America. Look at the ongoing treatment of unarmed black men at the deadly hands of a number of unhinged and rogue police officers. Then look at my work *The Making of Super Nigga*.

In 2015 I found myself compelled to make art in response to the wretched reality that is the bedrock of our great United States. Here, the white police officer (or "Super Nigga") mutates into the beastly men he has succeeded in demonizing and murdering in cold blood.

The police officer is mangled, wracked by his violent history going back to the Ku Klux Klan and ruled by his terror. He is bound at the hips by the imagined large and mighty penis of the black man who overpowers him and represents the center of his inferiority and insecurity. And of course, no depiction of an officer would be complete without his gun ready at hand, his only recourse for fighting against the fears—the fear of that black man—that lie within him.

The subject is dressed in a vintage-like Superman costume with the colors of the American flag. Superman, an American hero, is in fact an immigrant who pretends, as his disguise, to be clumsy and incompetent in order to fit in. The police officer thinks he needs his uniform to declare himself better than the lesser earthly mortals.

In today's political climate—both here in America and around the world—there is a growing upheaval about the so-called majority's replacement, the changing of the guard, the fear that jobs and professional opportunities are somehow being taken from superior white men and given to black and brown folks.

We shall never forget the age-old chant of those Nazis marching down the street in the land of the brave and free that fateful morning in Charlottesville, Virginia. "Jews will not replace us! Blacks will not replace us!" And yet, their severe lack of competence prevents them from realizing the indisputable fact that they are not being replaced; simply put, they are being outperformed.

As a result, and scarily so, they're all becoming Super Niggas.

Quinn grew up drawing comics in the public housing projects on Chicago's South Side. Today he's a Brooklyn-based mixed-media artist who creates powerful composite portraits that explore social issues.

TIMOTHY CURTIS

BLUES PRISONERS. OIL ON CANVAS, 84 X 96 INCHES, 2019; *DESTROY SOMERSET*. 75 X 15 FEET, 2015

My career started on the streets of Philadelphia. I turned to graffiti at the age of nine, when my friend Fat Steve gave me my first tag, "Pipe." I stole some markers and a few years later taught myself calligraphy; I became fascinated with varying lines and how they communicated contrasting feelings and emotions.

Philadelphia graffiti culture has a style all its own, focused on long lines and embellishment and bound by friendship. No matter what neighborhood I bounced to or from, I was never alone. My friends were every race, color and religion, but we found common ground in being impoverished and fatherless. None of us knew much beyond our art and getting into trouble, but we always knew love.

Even in prison, camaraderie was my means of survival. In 2015, at the end of an eight-year sentence, I created a 75-foot painting in the gymnasium at Somerset state prison with fellow inmates. The goal was to paint something that pushed against the system's deep-rooted hatred for the poor and people of color. My collaborators were all serving life sentences, so the walls stand for them. We painted a brown fist holding a 100-pound kettlebell smashing "Somerset" to pieces. The explanation I gave the prison staff, however, referenced the CrossFit program. This was my "Good-bye, fuck you!"—a proclamation that no prison could kill our spirits or creativity.

My work, including the piece above, focuses on powerful lines that put my emotions into action. It's intended to provoke thought, connection and happiness. I aspire to create a new visual language available to all people. I don't claim to know what makes art great; I just keep drawing and painting, hoping to find out one day.

In my experience, activism is powerful when it's loud *and* when it's soft. Sometimes it's the quiet, cautious works—the ones that feel like a secret shared among a select few—that make communities feel closest.

Curtis, a self-taught artist born in Philadelphia and based in New York City, focuses on calligraphy and graffiti-inspired line work.

ICY AND SOT

IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT BORDERS. RAZOR WIRE AND FLOWERS ON CONCRETE, 2017

It all began with skateboarding, when we were just 21 and 15. We would spend our days in 2006 skateboarding around Tabriz and post simple self-made stencils and stickers all over the city. We didn't know anything about the international street-art movement at the time, but we soon became obsessed with learning all about it. But street art is heavily censored in Iran.

While the strict laws inspired our creativity, enforcement made it difficult to grow as artists. When we started to get attention and received international orders, we couldn't even ship the works, because mail was searched for contraband. We had to cover a given work with another, more traditional canvas. Still, we never lost our motivation.

After six years of working in Iran—and dealing with all the stress, fear and lack of support that comes with life as an artist there—we decided to leave. In 2012 we planned our first solo show in New York City, got our visas and finally made it to the United States. We haven't left since.

The freedom of America makes it so much easier to create, to experiment. But our knowledge of the lack of freedom in other parts of the world—issues of human rights, capitalism, censorship, ecological justice—continues to inspire, even as we've evolved beyond single-layer stencil work.

Still, despite the constant change in medium, we're sure to keep our work simple. With simplicity, we maintain a voice that can communicate across languages, regions and education levels.

We hope this piece falls in line with our goal to reach across any barriers that divide people all over the world. In *Imagine a World Without Borders,* the flowers cover the razor wire in protest. While barbed wire is meant to keep people out, flowers welcome people in.

Regardless of where they come from, all humans should be welcome. Immigrants, like us, leave what they know not because they want to but because they must. Sure, this work may play only a small role in your day, but maybe—even just for a moment—we can help you escape from the chaos and imagine a better world.

ICY and SOT are self-taught brothers from Tabriz, Iran who are inspired by their personal experiences with artistic and political censorship.

in focus

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
YUMNA AL-ARASHI

The young photographer-artist becomes the first Muslim woman to appear nude in Playboy—on her own terms and through her own lens. Pulitzer Prize–winning photojournalist ***Lynsey Addario*** *explores the significance of Yumna Al-Arashi's work*

For 65 years, the contours of women's bodies have been splashed across the pages of PLAYBOY. As a little girl, I remember stealing away with my older sisters to my uncle's top-floor apartment in our family-run hair salon to stare at the glossy images of naked women spread across triple-page folds. We laughed giddily as we wondered when our bodies would develop into such delicious and desirable shapes. Sometimes the woman in the photograph fondled herself, looking directly into the lens; other times she glanced back playfully from behind, her legs spread apart just enough. Her hair, tossed over one shoulder, looked either fresh out of bed or reminiscent of Farrah Fawcett's. The message to me was simple: A sensual woman was always ready for sex.

So some might find it surprising that this series of fully nude self-portraits for the magazine is by a Muslim: Yemeni American photographer Yumna Al-Arashi. But that seeming contradiction is exactly what drives Al-Arashi as a visual artist. She began her career as a photojournalist but transitioned to art and fashion after growing disillusioned with the confines of documentary photography, including a sense that Western viewers preferred Muslims, particularly Muslim women, to be portrayed as one-dimensional, oppressed and miserable. "She is always holding a dead baby or crying in the desert, or her home has just been bombed," says Al-Arashi, describing a typical image to me.

As a photographer working for Western media outlets, Al-Arashi worried she was perpetuating the fallacy that Muslim women exist only in a boundless landscape of helplessness, war and devastation. It bothered her. "We are so dynamic," she explains, "and we are all so different—just as any other type of person is. I felt I could use my voice to show another side rather than portray the same negativity."

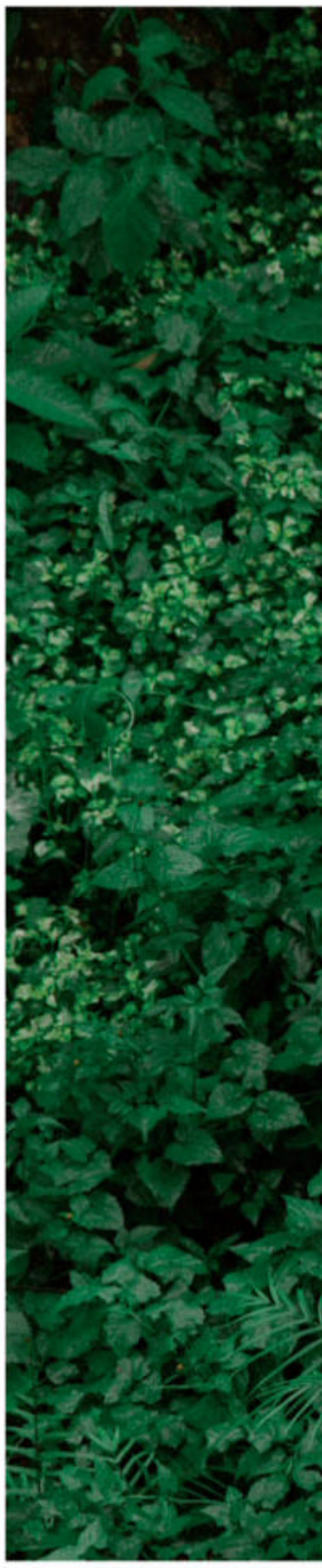
For years, Al-Arashi has used the body—hers and her friends'—as a subject in her photography and videography. "It conveys so much emotion that a normal portrait doesn't," she says.

In her 2017 photo series *Shedding Skin,* Al-Arashi captures women inside a *hammam,* or traditional bathhouse, in Lebanon. It evokes intimacy and sensuality and succeeds at peeling away layers of misconceptions about Muslim women. Although not every woman featured is Muslim, the mere notion of Middle Eastern women agreeing to be photographed naked proved groundbreaking.

When conceptualizing a shoot, Al-Arashi lets her surroundings and mood guide her vision. "For me, a nude self-portrait feels like a diary entry," she says. "I can't plan a diary entry. I can't plan the emotions." She works primarily in private spaces—at times difficult in her current home city of London—and shares the results on social media and in articles and exhibitions. Her photographs are evocative, sensual, playful—and a bit withholding: Information in the frame is often hidden by vegetation, a curtain, a billowing scarf or a body of water in which she's strategically immersed.

Al-Arashi claims her self-portraits are "the complete opposite of sexual," so she was understandably surprised when PLAYBOY approached her with this unprecedented assignment. "If they'd asked to feature me as a model in PLAYBOY, 100 percent I would have said no," she says. "As an Arab American, a Muslim and a woman in general, our bodies are often not our own. Having a female editor ask me to portray myself the way I wanted to be seen is really badass and history-making. It's usually a man photographing a woman in an objectifying way. But the idea of me interpreting the way I would like to be seen in PLAYBOY, understanding what that means and who the audience would be: If the audience is male, what do I want to show them as a woman taking photos of herself the way she wants to be seen? How do I want to communicate my nudity and my body? How do I want to talk to the male gaze for the first time?"

Her nude self-portraits, shot in the Philippines, succeed perhaps where her photojournalism failed. She is expanding the perception of Middle Eastern women by showing a portrait we rarely see: an Arab American Muslim woman unveiled, confident and in control of her image. On her Instagram feed is a scene from northern Yemen featuring Al-Arashi, swathed in a black abaya and black hijab, set against a spare, moon-like landscape. The caption: "A self portrait in Yemen. Don't underestimate women. We made you."



PLAYBOY

HERITAGE

FREE SPEECH

SHEL SILVERSTEIN

THE JAMAICA CLUB

WEED WARRIORS

THE SINGING PLAYMATES

JEANE MANSON

BRANDE RODERICK

VINTAGE ADVISOR

DEFYING THE ANTI-PORN POLICE

IS SEX A MENACE TO SOCIETY? RECENT SOCIAL MEDIA PURGES ARE EERILY EVOCATIVE OF A REAGAN-ERA ATTEMPT TO CENSOR *PLAYBOY*

BY **JAMES R. PETERSEN**

Last November, Apple's App Store removed Tumblr from its digital shelves after concerns arose that objectionable images, including child pornography, were slipping through the blogging platform's content filter. Within a month, all of Tumblr's explicit adult material had disappeared from public view. The concerns were serious and legitimate, but the rush to purge exploitative items from the site also ensnared vast swaths of perfectly healthy sexual content.

The episode eerily echoed past culture wars. An overly broad effort to stamp out sexual expression? We've been there.

• • •

In 1968, at the height of the sexual revolution, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. Its aim was to determine whether porn had negative social effects, and its conclusions, reached in 1970 and based on scientific study, were clear: There was no connection between consuming pornography and participating in antisocial behavior. A decade and a half later, the Reagan administration decided that it wasn't going to let little things like facts get in the way of a conservative crusade.

The 1980s were a cultural battleground, a time when misinformation frequently combined with moral panic to great inflammatory effect. Remember the Parents Music Resource Center, the coalition that took on the music industry in 1985 to protect kids from what it believed were inappropriate lyrics? Having labeled a Twisted Sister song pro-rape, PMRC co-founder Tipper Gore must have been surprised to hear singer Dee Snider testify in a Senate hearing that he was in fact a faithful Christian and that "Under the Blade" was actually about the fear of surgery. "The only sadomasochism, bondage and rape in this song is in the mind of Ms. Gore," he said.

At the time, fundamentalists and other anti-porn activists were fighting to control the public image of sex—to put the hard-won sexual freedoms of the 1960s and 1970s back in the box. The so-called religious right was on the rise and had a friendly audience in the White House: "We consider pornography to be a public problem," said Reagan in 1984. In May 1985, Reagan's attorney general, Edwin Meese, troubled by the rise of cable television, video recorders and dial-a-porn phone sex, among other developments, called for a reexamination. "Pornography now is available at home to almost anyone," he said.

Unlike its predecessor, the Meese Commission on Pornography was more interested in anecdotes than in scientific evidence. Holding public hearings in cities across the country, the 11-member group heard from 208 witnesses, including 30 alleged victims of porn—one of whom bemoaned the "connection between sexual promiscuity, venereal disease, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, sexual abuse of children, suicide, drug abuse, rape and prostitution to pornography."

PLAYBOY publisher and editor in chief Hugh Hefner stood firmly in opposition to the commission, whose efforts he called a "witch hunt." The commission "trundled out a parade of born-again basket cases, anti-sex feminists and fun-hating fundamentalists," he wrote in a January 1986 editorial. (Hefner was far

ILLUSTRATION BY **ROB STITES**

from the only critic of the commission; other prominent detractors included feminist Betty Friedan, novelist Kurt Vonnegut and actress Colleen Dewhurst.) Many of those who gave testimony at the hearings seemed to advance the domino theory of porn—that a single exposure would lead to a growing appetite for the bizarre, the violent, the perverse. One born-again Christian claimed he went from seeing a deck of pornographic playing cards at the age of 12 to shoplifting copies of PLAYBOY from the local grocery store to engaging in bestiality with the family dog.

Barry Lynn of the American Civil Liberties Union noted a distinctly conservative bias across the hearings. He calculated that of the 208 witnesses, "at least 160 (77 percent) were urging tighter controls over sexually explicit material," including law enforcement officers, elected officials, representatives of anti-porn groups and several prominent anti-porn activists. "Only two persons who might be characterized as avid consumers of the material stepped forward to testify," Lynn reported. "Commission investigators went out of their way to locate anti-pornography witnesses, sometimes even going so far as to help write the statements of victim witnesses."

The commission itself seemed far from impartial. Six of the members had, according to Lynn, a "clear anti-pornography bias." Two others opposed the distribution of sexually explicit content. "Not a single person who was known to be skeptical about the evidence linking pornography to violence or to be concerned about the First Amendment implications of anti-pornography legislation was appointed to the commission," Lynn said. And instead of taking a neutral approach to evaluating adult content, commissioners viewed images taken from the truly disgusting and criminal extremes, called them porn and then used that same word to describe practically all sexual expression. (Our favorite ridiculous vignette? As the panel viewed one picture, a supposed expert described it as a close-up of "a vagina surrounded by a woman.")

This, Hefner declared, was "sexual McCarthyism," a term he popularized. The hysteria of the Reagan administration, Hefner argued, was akin to the infamous Red Scare tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1950 McCarthy had proclaimed that he had the names of supposed Communists serving in the State Department and compiled blacklists of suspected "Reds." A pamphlet called *Red Channels* outed entertainers who worked with people on the blacklist; fellow travelers were made out to be as traitorous as alleged Communists. To Hefner, the parallels with the Meese commission were glaring: It was "trial by headline—unsupported by evidence, unchallenged by cross examination or witnesses for the defense—it is not due process. But it is the method of the Meese commission as it was for McCarthy."

In the 1980s, this tactic evolved: Now representatives of the state were choosing depictions of acts that all Americans could agree were wrong and then widening the definition of "wrong" to include virtually anything the crusaders found offensive.

• • •

Among the witnesses appearing before the Meese commission was Donald Wildmon, head of the National Federation for Decency. The Methodist minister from Tupelo, Mississippi had declared his own war on sex, hiring elderly women to count the jiggle scenes on an episode of *Charlie's Angels;* his monitors were also tasked with tallying the number of times the cast of *Saturday Night Live* used the word *penis,* and creating lists of advertisers on shows that offended them. The results were presented in a publication called the *NFD Informer*. Wildmon organized boycotts outside stores that sold PLAYBOY and wrote threatening letters to heads of corporations, advising them that they were complicit in the porn industry for helping distribute smut. Coca-Cola, Time Inc., Simon & Schuster and more were targets of Wildmon's ire. (SARA LEE IS LEADING PORN PUSHER, declared one *NFD Informer* headline about the frozen-dessert company.) In a July 1986 editorial, Hefner called him out: "From his perspective, nudity, sex education, birth control, sex between unmarried consenting adults—even evolution—are indefensible. So he has been harassing companies."

For three years, the Southland Corporation, a major operator of 7-Eleven stores, treated Wildmon as the nuisance he was. Then, perhaps with visions of McCarthy waving a list of supposed Reds, Wildmon gave the Meese commission his enemies list, proclaiming that Southland was among "the leading retailers of porn magazines in America." In February 1986, Alan Sears, executive director of the commission, mailed an ominous letter on Justice Department stationery to the heads of many businesses. The commission had "received testimony alleging that your company is involved in the sale or distribution of pornography," the letter read. "This commission has determined that it would be appropriate to allow your company to respond to the allegations prior to drafting its final report section on identified distributors." What Sears didn't mention is that the testimony came from one of the commission's own members.

With its none too subtle "Are you now, or have you ever been" tone, the letter intimidated executives of Southland, Peoples Drug Stores, Rite Aid and others into pulling PLAYBOY and other magazines off their shelves.

Hefner immediately saw the First Amendment implications. The Sears letter banned "the distribution and sale of PLAYBOY magazine and of other lawful publications without affording those magazines a fair hearing before an impartial tribunal," he wrote. Without due process, the magazine had effectively been declared obscene. Although 4,500 7-Eleven locations stopped selling PLAYBOY as a result of the letter, the key issue for Hefner was not financial but constitutional. "Justice Robert Jackson once said it was not the government's role to impose orthodoxy on America's citizens—nor to impose a couple of obsessed individuals' views of what is acceptable and what is not. The victimization of 7-Eleven is a tragedy, not as much for PLAYBOY—two thirds of our circulation comes from subscriptions—as for all of us."

PLAYBOY took its objections to court, filing a lawsuit against Meese, Sears and other members of the commission. The American Booksellers Association and the Council for Periodical Distributors Association soon joined the suit. In July 1986, the case was decided in PLAYBOY's favor. "A deprivation of a First Amendment right, that is a prior restraint on speech, a right so precious in this nation, constitutes irreparable injury," ruled the federal judge.

The Meese commission apologized for the Sears letter, declaring publicly that PLAYBOY was not obscene, and it refrained from including a blacklist of supposed offenders in the final version of its report (which, we like to remember, Meese presented to the public while standing before a bare-breasted statue of Justice). But it is notable that a draft version of the report contained, along with Wildmon's blacklist, disturbing proposals for the creation of citizen groups that would monitor stores and networks for evidence of obscene material—in other words, morality police.

• • •

Efforts like those of Tumblr and the Meese commission may start with noble objectives—eradicating child porn, preventing sexual slavery and violence—but they can easily slide down a slippery slope into a cultural totalitarianism under which morality is policed and sexual content is indiscriminately suppressed. All Americans must stay vigilant against such censorship. Nothing less than our personal freedoms are at stake. ■

THE GOOD *Fight*

We get it: It can be easy to overlook the words in this magazine. So every now and then we like to remind our readers that since its inception PLAYBOY *has championed First Amendment rights—in print and in court. That work continues today as we spark urgent conversations through the Playboy Interview, with recent subjects ranging from dissident artist Ai Weiwei to pro-choice leader Cecile Richards, and our photography, with stunning portraits of the proudly hijabi reporter Noor Tagouri, a Bunny-eared Ezra Miller and so much more. Below, take a tour of some other notable free-speech moments from the company's first half-century.*

1954

Hugh Hefner successfully fights the U.S. Postal Service's attempts to censor PLAYBOY by refusing to deliver copies of the magazine. "We don't think Postmaster [Arthur] Summerfield has any business editing magazines," Hef says. "We think he should stick to delivering the mail."

1961

PLAYBOY goes to bat for the newly available birth control pill—at the time a wildly taboo subject in America. "To millions for whom children are economically, physically or psychologically inadvisable," ran a piece in the June issue, "the pill promises to become a connubial boon."

1963

For the brazen act of depicting a topless Jayne Mansfield in bed before a besuited man, Hef is arrested on obscenity charges. The case against him melts into a mistrial and inspires Hef to write in the *Playboy Philosophy:* "We must be constantly on the alert to make certain that the label of 'obscene' is not used to censor other areas of free speech and press."

1977

Proving its devotion to constructive satire, the magazine runs pages of a mock Soviet PLAYBOY (slugged "Social Uplift for Comrades"), complete with a tractor pictorial and an ad for a "nyet-skid condom."

1973

Having championed safe, legal abortion for a decade in the magazine—and running dozens of letters from women who had risked everything on back-alley procedures—Hef files an amicus curiae brief in the *Roe v. Wade* case.

1964

Comedian Lenny Bruce faces his own obscenity trial after a particularly barbed set in New York. Hef, who amplified Bruce's reputation as an incendiary truth-teller through the magazine and *Playboy's Penthouse,* helps fund his legal fight.

1979

Playboy CEO Christie Hefner launches the Hugh M. Hefner First Amendment Award. With recipients over the years ranging from Penn & Teller to Zephyr Teachout, the award recognizes artists, educators, politicians and journalists who put it all on the line for our freedom of speech.

1980

Hef lands the Anti-Defamation League's First Amendment Freedoms Award. William F. Buckley, writing about the black-tie reception held in Hef's honor, muses, "If the guests arrive wearing only a black tie, that will be more than some of the guests wear at Hef's other parties."

1986

The famously puritanical Meese Commission sends menacing letters to PLAYBOY retailers, about 10,000 of whom promptly remove the magazine from their shelves. A district court declares the letters a form of censorship and orders them withdrawn.

2000

After Playboy TV expands to 24-hour programming, our lawyers once again find themselves invoking the First Amendment. The Supreme Court sides with the Rabbit, ruling that a section of the 1996 Telecommunications Act—requiring cable providers to limit sex shows to certain times and to scramble the signal for non-subscribers—constitutes a content-based restriction, thus violating the company's free-speech rights.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **MONICA GARWOOD**

THE SUBVERSIVE SCRIBBLER

REMEMBERING SHEL SILVERSTEIN, *PLAYBOY*'S BELOVED "PROTO-PUNK" POET AND CARTOONIST

BY **SASCHA COHEN**

IT WAS A POEM ABOUT A GIRL WHO WANTED a pony that first landed Shel Silverstein in trouble. Published in his 1981 collection of illustrated children's poetry, *A Light in the Attic,* "Little Abigail and the Beautiful Pony" angered parents for its supposed glorification of suicide: Horse-obsessed Abigail stops eating and sleeping and eventually dies, "All because of a pony / That her parents wouldn't buy." Or maybe it was Silverstein's cheeky closing lines that had truly upset the moms and dads who pushed to ban the poem: "This is a good story / To read to your folks / When they won't buy / You something you want."

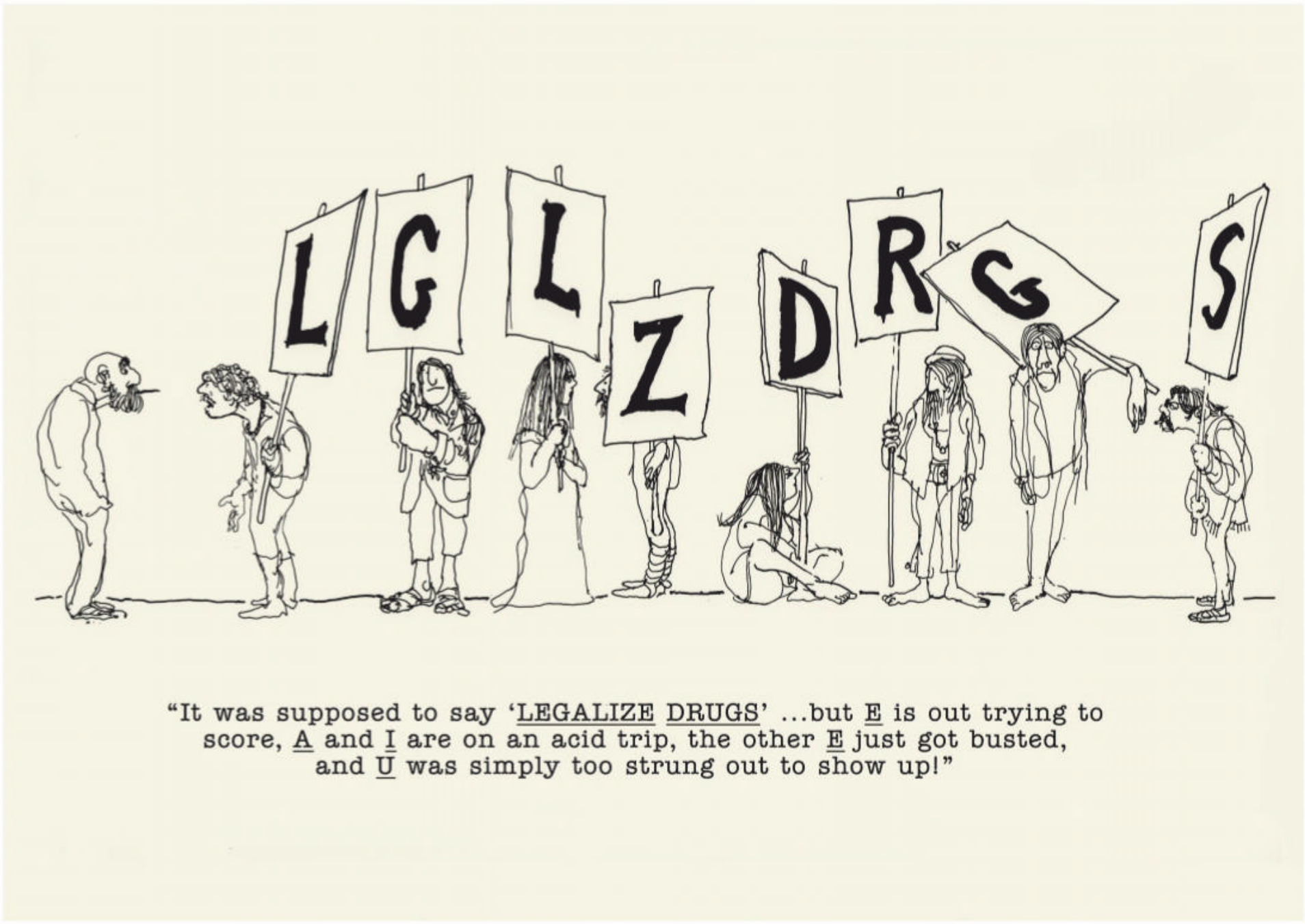
For years Silverstein's work hovered near the top of the American Library Association's list of most-challenged books. Community groups in seven states attempted to ban from elementary classrooms *A Light in the Attic* and an earlier volume, *Where the Sidewalk Ends,* for being "suggestive," "sick" and "disturbing to young minds." Given the antiauthoritarian spirit that animates much of Silverstein's writing, the pushback is perhaps unsurprising. With his carnivalesque illustrations and tales of misbehaving, manipulative kids, Silverstein was a disruptor within the genre of children's literature. Yet his distinctly mischievous streak would be familiar to those aware of his earlier work as an artist catering to more mature readers.

• • •

A longtime doodler, Silverstein walked into Playboy's Chicago office one day in 1956 and dropped off an unsolicited portfolio. Upon seeing his work, Hugh Hefner quickly bought several drawings for the magazine. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration, as well as a lifelong friendship.

Over the next two decades, Silverstein—whom the magazine labeled, at various points, PLAYBOY's "peerless prankster," "wandering beard" and "whiskered wit"—was a regular contributor. He landed a dream assignment: traveling around the world to scribble his impressions of destinations including Moscow, Italy, Africa and Paris. Silverstein sketched himself as a tourist in these exotic locations and liked to use clever captions to comment on local customs—and to poke fun at himself. In a cartoon from his Switzerland visit, he sits in the town square and remarks, "I'll give them 15 more minutes, and if nobody yodels, I'm going back to the hotel." His *Silverstein in Hawaii* entry depicts a hula girl draping a chain of flowers around his neck, commenting, "It's spelled *l-e-i,* sir, and I've heard that joke 3,227 times."

"LGLZ DRGS" CARTOON BY SHEL SILVERSTEIN. © EVIL EYE, LLC. USED BY PERMISSION.


L G L Z D R G S
"It was supposed to say 'LEGALIZE DRUGS' ...but E is out trying to score, A and I are on an acid trip, the other E just got busted, and U was simply too strung out to show up!"

Opposite page: *Silverstein sketches a London scene for the June 1967 issue, his second time covering the city for the magazine.* ***Above:*** *His 1968 dispatch from San Francisco, Silverstein Among the Hippies, ran in two parts over the summer of 1968 and included 27 original illustrations, including the one shown above.*

His humorous travelogues became the second-most-popular PLAYBOY feature—after the Centerfold, naturally.

Silverstein was PLAYBOY's liaison to new subcultures stirring across the country during a period of potent social transformation. Throughout the 1960s, he documented America's burgeoning counterculture, illustrating the new slang and sexual norms of the beatniks in Greenwich Village and the free-love hippies in San Francisco. He reported on a nudist camp in Pennsylvania "in the interest of journalistic expression and a freer press," he wrote with a wink. His 1965 dispatch from Cherry Grove, a gay resort community on New York's Fire Island, prompted reader praise for its "total absence of moralizing."

"He came along at a time when things were starting to happen in many different directions, and he ran with all of it," says fellow cartoonist Jules Feiffer, who remembers that Silverstein portrayed the world around him with "a great sense of play and mischief."

Silverstein had a particular affinity for the freakish and the monstrous—see, for example, *Silverstein's Zoo,* a collection of unusual animal drawings paired with nonsensical verse, or *Uncle Shelby's Kiddie Corner,* a series of twisted nursery rhymes definitely not intended for children. Literary scholar Joseph Thomas describes Silverstein's distinctive drawing style as "proto-punk, sketchy and improvisatory," different from the more polished comics found in PLAYBOY's pages and lending the brand a dash of gritty bohemianism. Some of Silverstein's early cartoons, Thomas says, "look like pieces that were jotted down on a bar napkin." Yet he was a classic perfectionist, taking great care to arrange his compositions. It takes a real artist to make work that looks so effortless.

• • •

Silverstein, who died 20 years ago this May, brought this devotion and energy to all his creative projects. Although his work has, as Thomas says, the "folksy quality" of outsider art, Silverstein nevertheless achieved enormous mainstream success. In addition to his best-selling books, he won a Grammy for his song "A Boy Named Sue," and he collaborated with luminaries such as David Mamet and Bob Dylan.

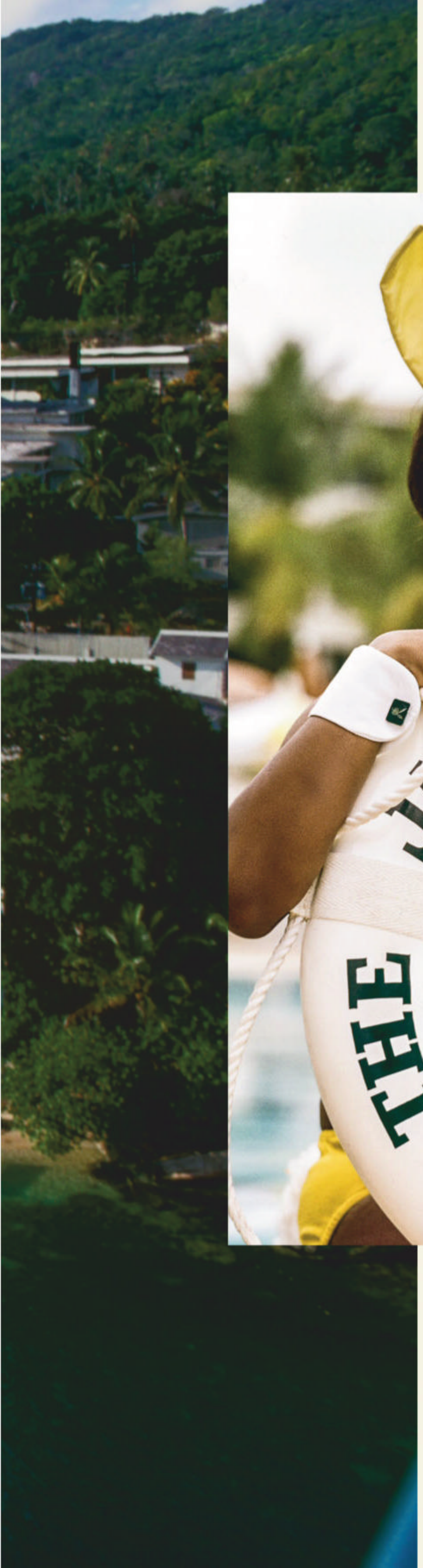
Those who knew Silverstein describe him as unconventional, with a devil-may-care attitude and footloose lifestyle. Feiffer remembers his friend fondly as a "free spirit, a legitimate wild man," and "a bad boy who liked to play around." His signature outfit was a pirate shirt, tattered leather jacket and jeans with sandals, and he often carried a guitar. He partied with Hef at the Chicago Playboy Mansion and attracted scores of women—but he didn't want to settle down. "I don't find that one town or one woman, or one job or one career makes me happy. What makes me happy is changing all the time," Silverstein, who never married, once said.

That his work was frequently banned hasn't stopped readers of all ages from connecting with the material: Silverstein's books have been translated into more than 40 languages and sold more than 35 million copies.

Two decades after his death, he remains an American original. "He has no imitators," says Feiffer. "There's no way to try to be what Shel was. He was all himself." ■

The Rabbit in Paradise

BY CAT AUER



Christened in 1965, our first international club kicked off an especially heady chapter in Playboy history

In early 1964, Playboy was riding high on the success of its nascent network of clubs in cities as far-flung as Chicago, New York, Phoenix, Baltimore, Cincinnati and New Orleans—a veritable galaxy of nighttime hot spots. Business was better than good: The company's net sales and revenue topped $30 million, and executives continued to dream big. It was time for an international club, one that would add something new to the Playboy mix: overnight accommodations. For the first Playboy hotel, they turned their eyes southward.

Jamaica had less than two years earlier transitioned from British rule to independence, and its young government was hungry for foreign investment. The gears started turning in Playboy founder Hugh Hefner's mind, and in January 1964 the company paid $2.75 million for a beachfront property on the island's north coast. More than $1 million went into renovations to bring the resort up to Playboy standards. Bunnies were flown in from the U.S. to train locals in the art of the Bunny dip, perch and stance; it was Hefner's goal to eventually have a majority-Jamaican staff. (He also wanted to be sure they were taken care of, and the company boasted that "new health and welfare benefits, which the club provides its employees, represent a first in the Jamaica hotel industry.")

The resulting slice of luxury, nestled in the lush Caribbean rain forest outside Ocho Rios, was christened the Playboy Club-Hotel and opened to great fanfare in January 1965. The company flew in a stable of lucky journalists for the official weeklong launch. Jamaican prime minister Alexander Bustamante attended opening night, as did official representatives of Queen Elizabeth II.

With more than 200 rooms—160 air-conditioned units in the main building and 44 lanai rooms on the beach—the resort was set up to handle crowds. Guests were spoiled for choice of activity: Snorkeling, scuba diving, boating, waterskiing and fishing (in a cove known as Bunny Bay) were on offer. There was horseback riding, tennis and shuffleboard. Cruises in a glass-bottom boat; tours to the nearby Dunn's River Falls—a 600-foot-tall cataract—and the luscious Fern Gully; dollar-bet pari-mutuel goat races...and for those who preferred indoor recreation, a full room-service menu.

Alongside regular vacationers, corporations including 3M and General Electric booked time at the resort—as did "the entire officer complement of the *USS Fearless,*" according to *VIP* magazine. Attendance was surely goosed by full-page ads in PLAYBOY, which in 1965 had a circulation of 3.5 million.

The warm reception for the Jamaica outpost kicked the company's confidence into overdrive. In the late 1960s and early 1970s several huge hotel complexes went up: in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (360 rooms), Chicago (400 rooms), Miami Beach (500 rooms) and Great Gorge, New Jersey (700 rooms). Initially the Jamaica and Wisconsin locations did well, but not the others, and it became clear that, for all its glamour, the empire was overextended. As executive Victor Lownes later recalled, "I only wish Jamaica had flopped. If Jamaica had flopped, they wouldn't have made all those other big mistakes."

By the mid-1970s the island's fortunes had shifted as well, the political situation increasingly unstable. In March 1977, the resort was shuttered, bringing to a close Playboy's dozen years of tropical paradise. Still, with all due respect to Lownes, the club saga is a reminder that Playboy would be nothing without big dreams.

Preceding pages: *Playboy's first resort boasted an 800-foot-long white-sand beach.* ***Inset:*** *The famed one-piece Bunny corset was updated for outdoor service: "Resort Bunnies" sported two-piece waterproof suits.* ***This page, top:*** *Playboy's club magazine described the Dunn's River Falls experience as a "safe but slippery upward climb from boulder to boulder through the misty spray to the top of the falls and down again."* ***Middle:*** *With a view of the distinctive yellow-and-white rotunda of the main dining room and the bay beyond, this romantic spot was nicknamed the Bunny's Nest.* ***Left:*** *The Shipwreckers, the resort's roving calypso band, provided live poolside music.*

Above: *More than two dozen Bunnies staffed the club's five bars and other dining areas. The drinks menu included everything from Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee to cocktails such as the Rabbit Punch—a rum, fruit juice and Galliano concoction. The versatile Bunnies led lessons on "all the latest Latin and American dances," as well as how to limbo.* ***Below left:*** *Snorkelers consider an underwater kiss in the reef-protected cove.* ***Below right:*** *Guests could play volleyball on the beach or in the Olympic-size pool. Come nighttime, the pool was the scene of a synchronized water show.*

The hotel-club was lavish inside and out, with nature's brilliant greenery rivaling the club's stylish furnishings, which had been selected by Playboy's design group. The property has changed hands since being sold in 1977; today it lives on as a Beaches resort.

WEED WARRIORS

The pot we smoke, vape and eat owes its increased legal status to a handful of pioneering activists—and, in one case, a platform and war chest provided by Playboy

"PLEASE, *PLAYBOY,* KEEP UP YOUR FIGHT AGAINST OUR barbaric marijuana laws." This January 1969 entreaty from a reader, regarding a Texas man who had received a 50-year sentence for selling a matchbox full of marijuana for $5, was one of more than three dozen letters about marijuana the magazine printed that year alone. One reader had been busted for .87 milligrams—about "four seeds and 15 grains of leaf"—found in his former apartment. The husband of another faced up to 10 years in prison for possessing 20 milligrams, about seven thousandths of an ounce. At the time, selling pot to a minor in Georgia could get you life in prison; a second offense, the death penalty. A simple possession sentence in Louisiana? Up to 99 years in jail.

To most observers, the punishments clearly did not fit the crimes. Personal liberties were at stake, and that was enough to catch PLAYBOY's attention—though of course the pleasurable aspects of pot use fell squarely within the magazine's wheelhouse as well. PLAYBOY had been covering marijuana-related topics since at least 1960, when it convened a panel of jazzmen including Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie to talk about narcotics and music. Later that decade, the magazine published a professional assessment entitled *Pot: A Rational Approach.* "Not only is marijuana comparatively harmless on the face of all the evidence," wrote trailblazing psychiatrist Dr. Joel Fort, "but there are even reasons to believe it may be beneficial in some cases." The title could well describe the course of action that publisher Hugh Hefner felt his magazine should take when it came to the drug. It would not endorse but would explore, calling attention to unjust laws and outmoded thinking. Supporting Americans' prerogative to choose came naturally to Hefner, who early in his multi-installment *Playboy Philosophy* had declared he would maintain "the right to hoot irreverently at herders of sacred cows and keepers of stultifying tradition and taboo."

Then, in 1970, Hefner met an ally. The state of pot in America would never be the same.

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Keith Stroup, a young lawyer in Washington, D.C. who had been radicalized by the Vietnam war, was trying to establish the country's first pro-pot consumer advocacy lobby—a revolutionary idea well-suited to the era. The newly formed Playboy Foundation, he thought, might grant him some much-needed support. Stroup applied for funds and was eventually invited to make his case to Hefner in Chicago, where he explained that with his nascent National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws he would campaign against marijuana prohibition and advocate for just laws and the fair treatment of users. A few days later, Stroup got an offer of $5,000 from the foundation, with the possibility of more funding should his organization demonstrate its value. It quickly did. "Within a few months, Playboy had committed to $100,000 a year in direct funding to NORML," Stroup says. The funding lasted throughout the decade. In addition, the magazine donated free full-page ads, which Stroup estimates brought in about $50,000 for NORML every time they ran, and Playboy held NORML fundraisers at both the Chicago and Los Angeles mansions. The magazine's coverage, including a 1977 *Playboy Interview* with Stroup, was also a boon to the group, which needed to win the hearts and minds of tokers *and* teetotalers if it was to effect real change.

"During the 1970s, whenever we would help some poor victim get out of jail who'd been locked up on a nonviolent marijuana offense, the *Playboy Forum* would feature that case," Stroup says. "It was incredibly helpful to us."

Stroup and other NORML lobbyists crisscrossed the country, seeking out state-level legislators willing to introduce decriminalization proposals and using the funding to send expert witnesses to the state hearings, "so that legislator looked like he knew what he was doing rather than looking like some radical," Stroup says. It worked: From 1973 to 1978, 11 states decriminalized marijuana, starting with Oregon. NORML also decided to take its battle to court, bringing the very first lawsuit against the government for classifying cannabis as a Schedule 1 drug—a designation it shares to this day with heroin.

Today, 66 percent of Americans support legalization—a far cry from the mere 12 percent that did in 1969. To a significant degree, this shift in public opinion is due to the work NORML has done over the decades. "But for that incredible support of the Playboy Foundation and Hugh Hefner individually," Stroup says, "I don't think NORML would have lasted beyond the first six months." We'll smoke to that.—*Cat Auer*

ILLUSTRATION BY **TARA JACOBY**

NORML founder Keith Stroup, in the February 1977 installment of the *Playboy Interview,* described the marijuana smokers whose rights he was fighting for as an "oppressed minority." Since as early as 1962, plenty of others have shared their thoughts on weed in the interview; here are five of our favorites.

"I THINK POT IS A LOT LESS HARMFUL THAN ALCOHOL FOR MOST PEOPLE. WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE ON POT? THEY GET MELLOW!"

—WILLIE NELSON, NOVEMBER 2002

"WE USED TO BE TERRIFIED IF WE EVEN SAW SOMEBODY TAKING A PUFF ON A JOINT. BUT NOW, IF YOU'RE A PARENT, YOU PRAY TO GOD THAT ALL YOUR CHILD IS DOING IS SMOKING MARIJUANA."

—SPIKE LEE, JULY 1991

"THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT MARIJUANA IS A SENSUAL STIMULATOR—AND THIS EXPLAINS NOT ONLY WHY IT'S FAVORED BY YOUNG PEOPLE BUT WHY IT AROUSES FEAR AND PANIC AMONG THE MIDDLE-AGED, MIDDLE-CLASS, WHISKEY-DRINKING, BLUE-NOSED BUREAUCRATS WHO RUN THE NARCOTICS AGENCIES."

—TIMOTHY LEARY, SEPTEMBER 1966

"I THINK IF MARIJUANA COULD REPLACE CIGARETTES AND LIQUOR, WE'D BE DOING EVERYBODY A SERVICE. MARIJUANA IS THE PEOPLE'S TRAFFIC."

—GERMAINE GREER, JANUARY 1972

"NOBODY OVERDOSES ON WEED. I'VE SPOKEN TO HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE—PATIENTS, SCIENTISTS, RESEARCHERS.... I THINK IT SHOULD BE A LEGALIZED MEDICATION IN THIS COUNTRY."

—SANJAY GUPTA, SEPTEMBER 2015

The SINGING Playmates

PRESENTING THE NEARLY LOST HISTORY OF THE ONE AND ONLY CENTERFOLD SUPERGROUP

ILLUSTRATION BY **CARMI GRAU**

BY
STEVE PALOPOLI

IN THIS AGE OF ALEXA AND SIRI, WHEN accessing information is usually as easy as shouting at your electronic device, it can be surprising to encounter a question with an elusive answer. This is doubly true of any topic related to Playboy's past, much of which has been thoroughly documented by fans, collectors and historians.

But ask Google about Playboy's one and only girl group, and you'll find just such a search-engine stumper. Although many of the specifics surrounding the group have been lost to time, the story of the Singing Playmates—one of lofty ambition, international scope and a bond that has lasted decades—is well worth telling.

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The Singing Playmates were formed in the late 1970s on the initiative of July 1977 Playmate Sondra Theodore. "It was her idea," says July 1981 Playmate Heidi Sorenson. "She was the lead in our group. And her voice was just out of this world."

The lineup changed over the years, but the core consisted of Theodore, Sorenson, Michele Drake (May 1979), Kelly Tough (October 1981) and Nicki Thomas (March 1977). Another figure central to the group was their producer, Vic Caesar, who looked and sounded like the radio disc jockey Wolfman Jack and was most famous for writing a Richard Nixon campaign song. (He also arranged the surprisingly famous theme to the Playboy pinball game.)

"He was like our den mother," says Tough. "We loved Vic because he pushed us, and he protected us too. I give him a lot of points for putting up with us, because we were a handful."

For several of the Playmates, getting into the group wasn't easy.

Drake had come out of the Los Angeles rock scene, where she was running around with members of the Knack and Joan Jett's former band the Runaways. The first time she auditioned for the Singing Playmates, she didn't make it. For her second tryout, she says, she brought along a little extra star power: Actor Dan Aykroyd escorted Drake in a limo to the Playboy Club. Still, she didn't make the cut. Determined to change her fate, Drake presented Theodore and Hefner with a tape of herself performing a song she'd written about an ex-boyfriend. "You wrote that?" she remembers Hef exclaiming. "You're in!"

Sorenson's first audition didn't go well either, and she initially wasn't chosen for the group—"probably because I was too self-conscious," she speculated in the story that accompanied her Playmate pictorial. At the time, she resided at the Playboy Mansion ("I think I have one of the records for living there the longest, actually," she says today), a situation she decided to turn to her advantage. The Singing Playmates rehearsed inside the Mansion's guesthouse, so Sorenson was able to hear every song they were working on. After they left for the day, she would go in and practice with their equipment.

"I was so determined to get into this group, you have no idea," says Sorenson. "I memorized everything. I learned all the harmonies. One day I talked Vic into letting me sing along during the rehearsal, and the rest is history." Determination was key: Rehearsals were five days a week, eight hours a day. "It was full-on. Everybody went into this 100 percent," she says.

Things got even more serious when famed dancer and choreographer Miriam Nelson was hired to polish up the act. Nelson, who passed away in 2018 at the age of 98, had collaborated with the biggest stars of the golden age of Hollywood, from Judy Garland to Doris Day. The practice space moved off Mansion grounds to a location on Sepulveda Boulevard.

"Hugh Hefner had converted a store into a rehearsal hall with a new dance floor, mirrors on the wall, a ballet barre and couches, chairs and a well-stocked refrigerator," Nelson wrote in her memoir *My Life Dancing With the Stars*. "It goes without saying these young women were beautiful and had gorgeous bodies, but their singing was fair and their dancing was fairer. I had my doubts about their abilities, but Mr. Hefner was paying terrific money."

"We got pretty strict," says Drake. "Miriam's job was to whip us into shape to become a Vegas act. We were very lucky to have her. She started us off in one-and-a-half-inch heels and got us up to two-and-a-half- to three-inch heels. She was a true pro. She knew what she was doing."

One day Hef swung by the practice space, unannounced, to see how the group was coming along. "The girls really put on a show for him," Nelson wrote. "They had such energy that for the first time, I could see this act was going to work just fine."

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The Singing Playmates got a taste of performing live with appearances at small clubs around L.A., billed under a different name so they could get some more or less anonymous practice time under their belt. "It was really funny," says Tough. "We would show up to a small venue in a big black limousine. When we were onstage, people were standing right at our feet. All these guys would be looking up at us while we were singing, like, 'Who are these broads?' "

By this time they had honed a highly choreographed song-and-dance routine that included a tune the popular soul singer Barry White had written, called "I'm So Glad That I'm a Woman." The set consisted mostly of medleys to which they could match their costumes: standards performed in top hats and tails; country songs in tight pants, vests and cowboy boots. Sometimes the

"They had such energy that for the first time, I could see this act was going to work just fine."

The Singing Playmates made multiple appearances at small venues in the Los Angeles area, including Danny's Apple nightclub in 1981, above. Pictured: Heidi Sorenson, Lorraine Michaels, Kelly Tough, Sondra Theodore and Jeana Tomasino.

singers conducted their wardrobe changes onstage, behind a scrim, allowing audiences to see their silhouettes.

They headed to Vegas and performed for *The Mike Douglas Show;* did a set on the nascent Playboy Channel (a stop for other musical acts as well, including Merle Haggard); and were booked at various Playboy Clubs, including the casino in Atlantic City, where Michele Drake remembers zero-degree temperatures outside and a lack of heat onstage—not to mention one bone-crunching set in particular. "I grabbed a guy's tie, slipped and fell and broke my index finger," says Drake. The next night she persevered, gripping her mike despite the splint on her injured digit.

Billboard sent a reporter to Atlantic City to cover the act, though he seemed to be more interested in the Playmates themselves than in their singing: "There was not much skin to see. Instead, they were perky and wholesome in the peekaboo Playboy manner, just slightly naughty. They sang about their favorite brands of designer jeans."

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The late months of 1981 brought the group even more exposure through two major holiday-related television productions: a New Year's Eve performance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson,* during which they played White's song and discussed posing for PLAYBOY, and an appearance on *George Burns's (Early) Early, Early, Christmas Special,* for which they performed in several skits and sang "Jingle Bells," among other numbers.

May 1967 Playmate Anne Randall (now Stewart) joined the group for the Christmas taping, stepping in for Jeana Tomasino (November 1980). Stewart, already established as a film and TV actress, was game, but she was older than her cohorts and disliked the opening sketch, for which she and the other Playmates were required to don "antlers," pull a gift-laden sleigh and tap their "hooves" on command.

"My family was furious at me because I was hiding behind everybody," Stewart says, "but I was 37 and wearing reindeer antlers, stamping with my foot! I was humiliated." Today she looks back fondly on the episode and the opportunity to do a vaudeville routine with comedy legend Burns, who seems to have charmed the whole group with a vibe Tough describes as "dirty old man—but in a very polite and respectful way."

The television shows had gotten them some much-needed attention, but the group still wasn't taking off. Around this time Tough decided she couldn't put the rest of her career on hold any longer. She recalls that the breaking point for her came after a famous country crooner, who had caught the Singing Playmates' act in Los Angeles, sent a couple of producers to work on demos with them. "I walked in and they had ordered a case of Cristal champagne—on our ticket—and they were doing coke on the soundboard and flirting with the girls. It cost a lot of money, and I didn't see much work get done that night," Tough says. For her, it was time to say good-bye.

The rest of the group soldiered on, doing international shows in places like Japan and the Philippines. "Things were a little dicey," Sorenson remembers about the Manila trip. "It was martial law there at that time, and we were pretty sure we were being followed. There were guys with machine guns on every corner."

By 1983 the group was recording demos in Los Angeles, but their momentum was fading. "We were moving more mainstream, a little bit more pop," says Sorenson. "The last stuff we did was really good, and then everything fell apart, unfortunately."

"Let's just put it this way: Life was happening to everybody," Drake says. "There's no blame. But it is a shame that we didn't go any further. The type of act we had would have been perfect for a USO tour."

Nearly four decades later, many of the members remain in contact. "We were all really close," says Tough. "We saw each other five days a week, eight hours a day. It was a lot of fun, and I'm really happy I did it."

"The group was like a little family," says Sorenson. "It was an exciting time, and the Singing Playmates were a part of that." Though the curtain came down on that era of Playboy history, the story of the Singing Playmates will live on. Alexa and Siri, take note. ■

The Chanteuse

WITH MILLIONS IN SALES, **JEANE MANSON**
IS A PLATINUM-RECORD PLAYMATE

Opposite page: *Jeane Manson performs in France in 1977.* ***Clockwise from top left:*** *Manson in 1981 (in addition to playing piano and guitar, she speaks three languages); an outtake from her August 1974 Playmate pictorial; a televised performance with Julio Iglesias in 1980; the May 1977 cover of Playboy France.*

***JE SUIS NÉE UNE SECONDE FOIS*—"I WAS BORN** a second time"—croons Jeane Manson on her hit 1976 single "Une Femme." The song is a love ballad, one she co-wrote, but the lyric could apply to her career: First she was an actress and August 1974 Playmate. Then she skipped across the pond and was reborn as a sensation in Europe.

Perhaps more remarkable than the millions of records Manson has sold over her career—a very successful act two, indeed—is the fact that few in her home country have ever heard one.

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Born in Cleveland and raised for more than a decade in Mexico City, Manson displayed a keen performative and musical bent as a young girl, taking up piano and guitar at the age of eight. After moving back to the States as a teen, she studied drama and voice. Manson began writing songs while living in Los Angeles, and in her early 20s pursued acting as well, taking roles in campy thrillers—like 1973's *The Young Nurses* (for Roger Corman's New World Pictures) and 1974's *Terror Circus*—to support herself.

In the early 1970s, her friend Cyndi Wood (1974 Playmate of the Year) introduced her to Hugh Hefner and brought her to the Playboy Mansion. Posing for the magazine seemed a natural choice in that sexually liberated era, Manson remembers. Hefner wanted to feature her in the magazine but kept sending her back for more shoots, which ultimately worked out in her favor. "For about two years, I was working for Playboy," she says. "Thank God! It helped me survive in Hollywood."

But modeling was never Manson's goal. Dissatisfied with the film work she was getting, she decided she needed a new start in a totally new place. "I wanted to be a serious actress and not just do B movies," she says. "I wanted something more interesting—Italian or French or Spanish films."

The same month her Centerfold finally hit stands in 1974, Manson flew to Europe with a single suitcase, her guitar and the ambition to take her career to the next level.

She got off to a good start: Manson briefly worked for legendary film producer Dino De Laurentiis, who sent her to Rome to meet Federico Fellini. "But I was still kind of starving," she says. So when she got an offer to act in a French TV commercial, she jumped at the chance. It turned out to be a life-changing decision. Shortly after booking it, Manson landed a contract to do an album.

"France opened its doors to me," Manson says. "It was quite amazing." To acclimate, she taught herself French through singing and songwriting. And because her given name, Jean, is masculine in French, she added an *e* to the end, becoming Jeane Manson.

Her sultry vocals caught Europe's attention. She turned Jean Renard's "Avant de Nous Dire Adieu" ("Before We Say Goodbye") into a massive hit in France in 1976—despite being brand-new to the French language.

"I knew it was going to be big," recalls Manson. "They gave me that song and said, 'Oh, you'll sell 50,000.' And I said, 'No, I'm going to sell 500,000.' I was very proud when it sold a million."

A string of French hits followed, including "Une Femme," "Ce N'est Qu'un Au Revoir" and "Vis Ta Vie." In 1979 Manson's budding fame led to one of the continent's most prominent gigs: competing in the Eurovision Song Contest. Manson continued to act, starring in various European films and TV shows. She has recorded in all three of the languages she speaks—English, French and Spanish—though of her 26 albums released over four decades, only a couple have been in her native tongue. Some of her early English-language recordings were produced by Vic Caesar, who worked with the Singing Playmates around the same time. What's French for *full circle*?

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Today Manson continues to record and tour, including a recent series of gospel performances in cathedrals across France. Though she has written and recorded mostly pop and country-western music, gospel themes stretch back to her 1977 hit "La Chapelle de Harlem." She feels no conflict between her more spiritual work and her sexier songs and Playmate past, though she admits to being curious about what might happen should she be recognized: "I sometimes wonder if the priests are going to look me up on the internet."

Will her music ever gain widespread recognition back home?

"It's never too late," she says from her home in Peralada, a medieval Spanish village near the border of Catalonia and France. "My dream is still to come back to the U.S. and sing at Carnegie Hall. Can you imagine? A Playmate at Carnegie Hall."

Now that's an act three we'd love to see.—*Steve Palopoli*

Brande Roderick

THE 2001 PLAYMATE OF THE YEAR ON HER NAME, HER FAME AND HER TIME WITH TRUMP

I GREW UP IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA wine country and moved to Los Angeles to be an actor. In the beginning, I slept on a couch and didn't have a car. I was trying to fulfill a dream—I'd done some television prior to becoming a Playmate, shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Love Boat: The Next Wave,* but PLAYBOY was my big stepping-stone.

I'd always wanted to be a Playmate. When my mom was pregnant she saw a girl named Brande, spelled with an *e,* in her uncle's copy of PLAYBOY. My mom wanted me to be beautiful just like this woman, so she named me Brande. The very first time I met Hef—a mutual friend took me to the Mansion for Sunday-night movies—I explained the story of my name. Hef took me to his library, and we flipped through magazines to see if we could find this girl. We didn't, but it was wonderful to meet him. The next time I saw him was at a nightclub in L.A. I said, "I'm the girl whose mom named her after a PLAYBOY model!" He invited me to sit with him, and that's when our friendship started.

I was Hef's girlfriend for two years, starting in 1998, which I've never really talked about. He had a huge impact on my life. He taught me so much about the entertainment business and how to handle success. People assume he's a party guy; what they don't know is he was very loyal. When he was with me, he was with me. It was a time when you'd go to parties and hang out with people like George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz. We didn't have camera phones or social media; we didn't have to worry about *TMZ*.

My April 2000 Playmate pictorial was shot at a winery near where I grew up. I was in my element, stomping grapes. My family was even in one of the photos featured in the magazine; we still laugh about it. I got cast on *Baywatch Hawaii* shortly after I shot that pictorial. I moved to Hawaii to do the show and got to hang out on the beach and swim in the ocean all day.

Then I got the call from Marilyn Grabowski, PLAYBOY'S photo editor, asking if I'd like to be 2001 Playmate of the Year. I said yes and hung up, screaming and jumping up and down in excitement with my girlfriend Stacy Kamano. The shoot was in St. Barts. I remember lying on a hammock on top of a cliff outside the house, looking at the water and feeling so thankful. I still felt shy, though, taking nude pictures in front of guys standing there with lighting equipment. I know it sounds weird, but I've always been on the conservative side. Being an actress helped me pose naked—I just put myself in the role, that beautiful sexy person, and played it.

When I auditioned for the movie *Starsky & Hutch,* Ben Stiller and the director, Todd Phillips, were in the room. They said, "Weren't you on *The Surreal Life*?" I said yes, and they were like, "Oh my God, we love that show. We love Emmanuel Lewis!" So I thought, *Hmmm.* I went and got an autographed Emmanuel Lewis eight-by-10 head shot—"To my man Todd, hire my girl Brande"—and sent that to him. I got the part. Always go the extra mile to get what you want.

When I lived at the Mansion I was like the mother hen, a mama bear; other Playmates would always come to me for advice. After I did my first *Celebrity Apprentice,* I thought, Now's the time to write a memoir. It became a 2010 self-help book based on my life experiences, called *Bounce, Don't Break.* Jenny McCarthy reviewed it, and Donald Trump contributed something to it; so did Hef.

Right around the 2016 election the media printed blatant lies, saying Donald had been constantly proposing to me on the set of *Celebrity Apprentice.* Nothing could have been further from the truth. Of course he flirts—he flirts with everyone—but he was nothing but respectful to me. He never acted the way the media tried to portray. I went to the inauguration, and it was an amazing experience. The energy there was just unbelievable.

Around that time I started to move away from entertainment. Part of it was because I had missed my youngest son's first day of kindergarten because I was in Louisiana, shooting a movie. And that broke my heart. Being a mother is the best thing I've ever done, and I never wanted to miss anything again. I went back into real estate—I'd graduated from high school a year early and gotten my real estate license when I was 18. My website is YourCelebrityRealtor.com. I spent 20 years working to build up my name, so I'm going to use it! But I still need a creative outlet. To promote my listings, I make videos—I write out the shot list, I plan the script, I direct. So I still get to scratch that artistic itch. From time to time I'll still do a TV show, like *Battle of the Network Stars,* or the occasional movie cameo.

Now I live in Temecula. I always wanted to have a vineyard and raise my kids with an upbringing similar to the one I had. I have five acres. It's a wonderful way of life. We're growing, and will eventually sell, the grapes. I plan to do my own rosé. I'm calling it Tara, first of all because my house kind of looks like the house in *Gone With the Wind,* but also because of what I've lived through. Going through divorce, rebuilding, starting from scratch and having strength—it's like the sentiment from the movie: "I'll never be hungry again." Calling it Tara Vineyards symbolizes that comeback feeling for me. It's not easy being a single mom and working full time, but I've always been very driven and motivated. I just get out there and do it.

Far right: *"Marilyn Grabowski always tried to come up with scenes that had to do with you as a person," Roderick says of her April 2000 pictorial, outtakes of which are shown here. "For me she thought of wine country, which was perfect. It was cool being able to shoot in my hometown. I recently went wine tasting at the same winery where we did my photo shoot!"* ***Right:*** *"I got a rose tattoo on my ankle when I turned 18. You know how it is: You turn 18 and suddenly you're allowed to do things—get a tattoo, buy a lottery ticket. The rose is the flower of my birth month. I got a second tattoo when I was 19, on my stomach. No more since then!"*

This page and opposite: *More outtakes from Roderick's photo shoots. "Playboy catapulted me to so many other things in my life. It shaped the person I am today. So did the fact that I was able to share a part of Hef's life, a part nobody ever gets to see. I hold that inside my heart; it's so special to me. I'm thankful for that."*
Opposite, bottom left*: "The shoot with the magnolias was at the Japanese gardens in Los Angeles. Very beautiful."*
Opposite, bottom right: *"I don't remember shooting with the parrot at all!"*

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EW YOR

BAYWATCH HAWAII
LIFEGUARD

Blast!
Buell

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Above: *Roderick's PMOY shoot. "St. Barts was the best. I remember very clearly the beautiful teak sailboat we shot on."* ***Opposite, top left****: Playmates of the Year Raquel Pomplun (2013), Brande Roderick (2001), Nina Daniele (2018) and Tiffany Fallon (2005) at the New York Playboy Club in 2018. "I was a VIP guest at the opening of the club with Tiffany," Roderick says. "It was so much fun to talk to the younger girls. Whenever I meet a new Playmate, there's an instant bond of sisterhood."* ***Opposite, top right:*** *"Most of the Baywatch girls had been in the magazine," Roderick remembers. "Baywatch and* PLAYBOY *had a wonderful marriage for a while. It was only natural, because both exuded that brand of sunny, blonde, southern California sexiness."* ***Opposite, bottom right:*** *"That was the very first episode of the first Celebrity Apprentice I did, with Joan Rivers! Playboy gave us a check. It drew a lot of attention, raised tons of money, and it was fun getting the support from my Playboy family."* ***Opposite, bottom left:*** *"I got an amazing prize package for Playmate of the Year—a car, a motorcycle, a personalized Gibson guitar and lots more. I had ridden dirt bikes before then but never motorcycles."*

CLASSIC

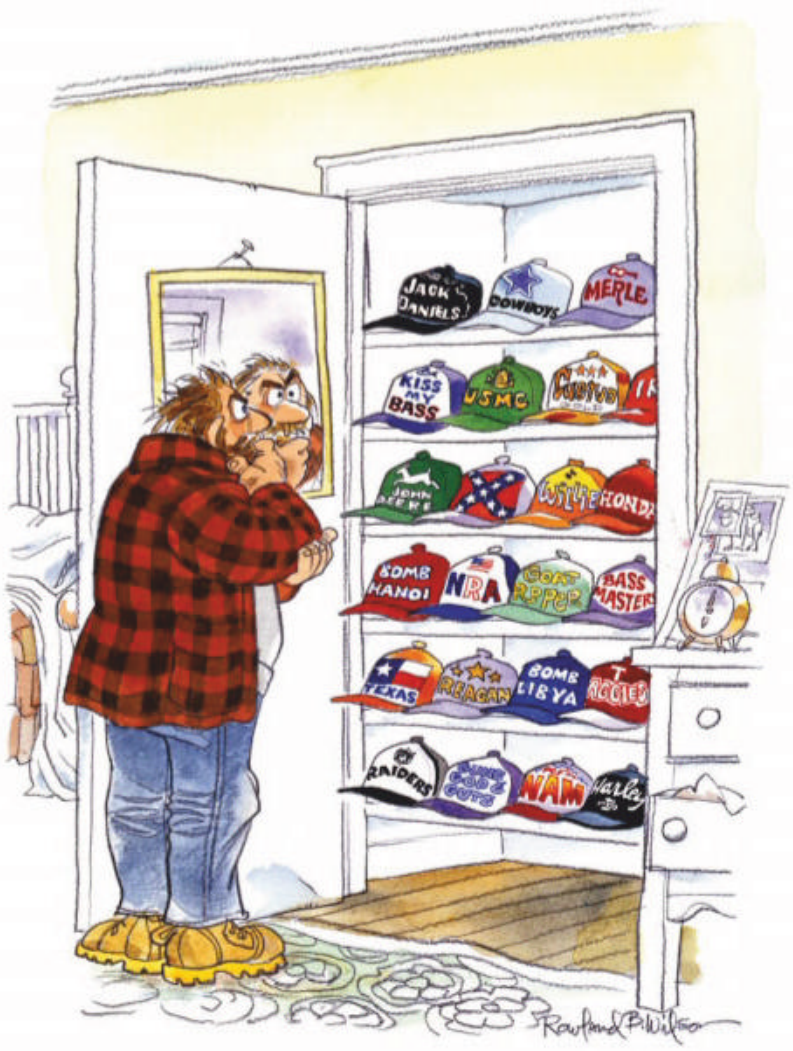
"What did you expect to find in a codpiece?"

"Harold, aren't you going to give your sweet old grandmother any pot?"

"I'm an American taxpayer! I've already been ripped off!"

"Gee, honey, I'm sorry, but you did say to talk dirty."

CARTOONS



"What a pity. We were so hoping you were bisexual."

"As he opened the top button of her blouse and exposed more of her lovely skin, Rodric's heart pounded fiercely. His hands quivered as he reached to complete his task. 'Stop!' commanded Father Antonio."

"Why do you have to be such an asshole? The door's open!"

Vintage Advisor

You wouldn't keep pictures of your ex on your desk, so why keep them on your phone? The Playboy Advisor offers some timeless advice on letting go

FROM THE MARCH 1998 *PLAYBOY*

As a birthday gift last year, my then girlfriend gave me erotic photos of herself. She made me promise never to show them to anyone, and I never have. We had a bad breakup, and now she wants them back. A friend who is a lawyer says I have no legal obligation to return them since they were a gift. I want to do the right thing but would like to keep them as mementos of our relationship. Despite how things turned out, I have good memories of our time together. What should I do?—S.W., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Keep your memories and return the photos. If you miss the photographs more than you miss her, you didn't have a relationship worth remembering.

OUR ADVISOR REFLECTS

Our 1998 *Advisor*'s advice to return the photos is still appropriate, but for reasons that go beyond one's desire to hold on to memories—primarily, the rise of revenge porn. In 1998, dial-up internet was far from its zenith, with only 41 percent of adults online, according to a 1999 Pew Research Center report. Though porn was proliferating across the web, it wasn't until the mid-2000s that camera phones became ubiquitous and ushered in the era of dick pics and nude selfies. That laid the foundation for revenge porn as we know it—and reaffirmed the necessity of honoring our exes' wishes to return or delete erotic photos of them.

Revenge porn is defined by *Merriam-Webster* as "sexually explicit images of a person posted online without that person's consent, especially as a form of revenge or harassment." That definition may be misleading, however, according to the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, which reports that nearly 80 percent of perpetrators are not motivated by revenge or ill will toward the photo's subject. As such, CCRI prefers the term *nonconsensual pornography,* as it encompasses the sharing of images originally obtained consensually—such as during an intimate relationship, as S.W.'s were—and those obtained without consent, such as via hidden cameras or hacking.

One of the original (and arguably most infamous) purveyors of revenge porn is Hunter Moore, creator of the now-defunct site Is Anyone Up? In 2012, the FBI began investigating Moore for posting nude photos of women, some of which had been submitted by men who wished to humiliate the subjects. The results were harrowing for the victims. In addition to being slut-shamed and bullied on the internet, some of the women went so far as to quit their jobs and change their names. (In other cases, revenge porn has even reportedly led to suicide.)

The site was shut down in 2012. Moore, sentenced to two and a half years in prison for aggravated identity theft and illegally accessing someone else's computer for financial gain, is already a free man and has written a book.

Despite Moore's conviction, revenge porn has continued to infect our cultural psyche to an alarming degree. Numerous reports have surfaced of hackers infiltrating cell phones, cloud storage sites, personal laptops and other digital spaces where people commonly store intimate photos. Female celebrities including Rihanna, Kate Upton, Miley Cyrus, Kirsten Dunst, Gabrielle Union and Jennifer Lawrence have become targets of nonconsensual pornography. Speaking to *Vanity Fair* about her experience, Lawrence called the data breach a "sex crime." Male celebrities haven't been spared either: Nick Hogan, Cheyenne Jackson and Tyler Posey have all had their personal photos leaked online.

Many people have argued that apps such as Snapchat and the Facebook-owned Instagram, both of which allow users to send and receive private images that expire after viewing, have contributed to the rise of revenge porn. In 2017, Facebook found itself at the center of an intense revenge-porn scandal when members of a user-created group, Marines United, were caught sharing explicit images of female colleagues, who were then subjected to threats and harassment. Facebook eventually shut down the group, and seven marines were court-martialed in the aftermath.

Facebook is still struggling to keep a lid on the problem, as are other photo-hosting apps. Some have launched safeguards to flag inappropriate content for review, but flagged images can stay online for hours before moderators remove them. To combat revenge porn, Facebook recently initiated the rollout of a pilot program in which the company asks users to upload intimate photos of themselves so its software can register them and block subsequent uploads. Users largely agree the program is a dicey solution to a massive problem.

Although our 1998 *Advisor* question claims that one has no legal obligation to return something received as a gift, some 40 states and the District of Columbia now have statutes against revenge porn, so keeping intimate photos of your ex, in our opinion, is riskier than it's worth—especially since 668 data breaches occurred by mid-2018, according to Statista.

Legal risk aside, you absolutely have a moral obligation here. We should all understand why our exes would want their nude photos returned—or, in these digital times, proof they've been deleted. That's because we should all have the right to express our sexuality to our romantic partners without fear of retribution. Return or destroy your ex's nudes and enjoy the memories. It's the right thing to do.—*Maria Del Russo*

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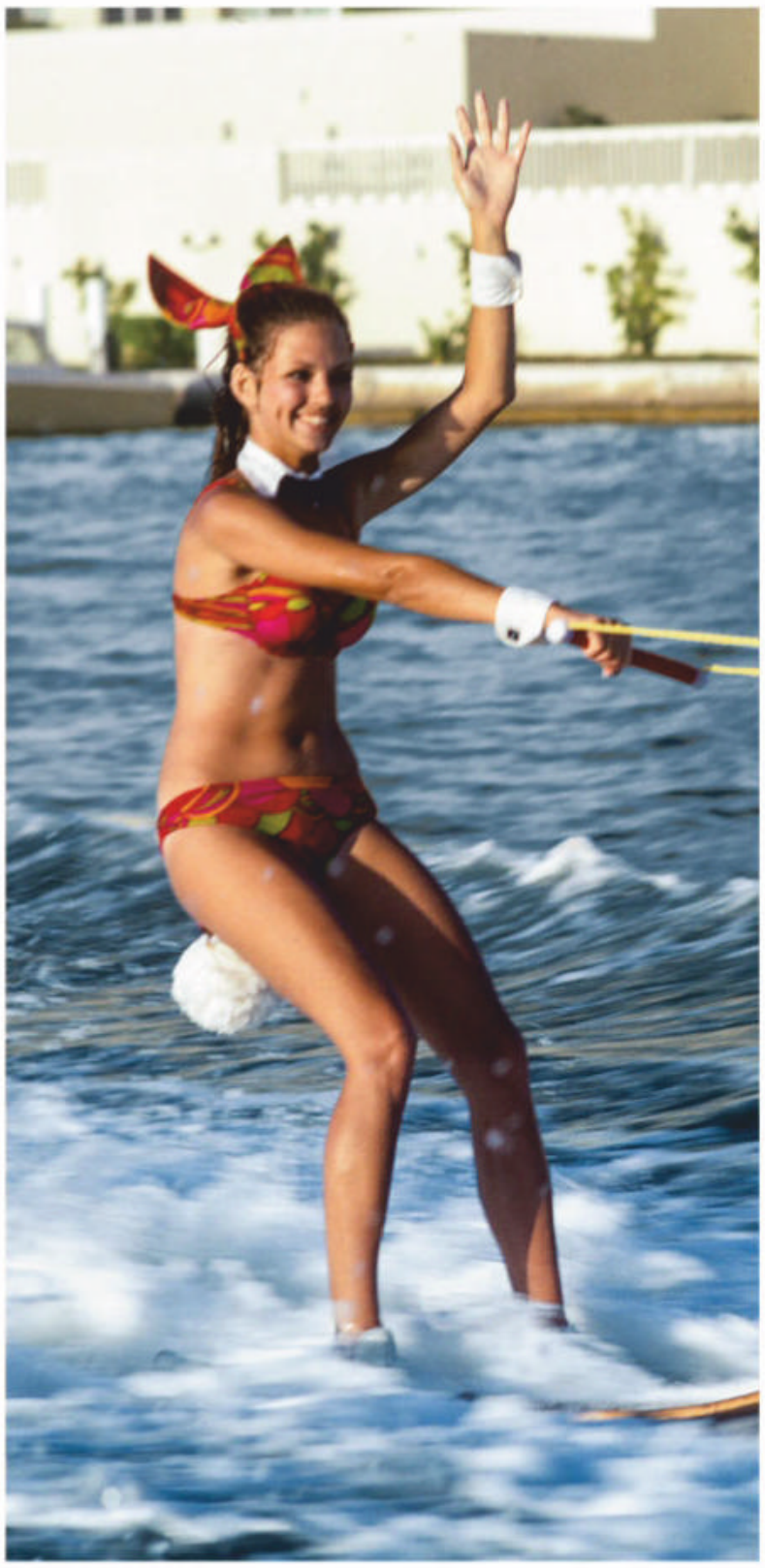
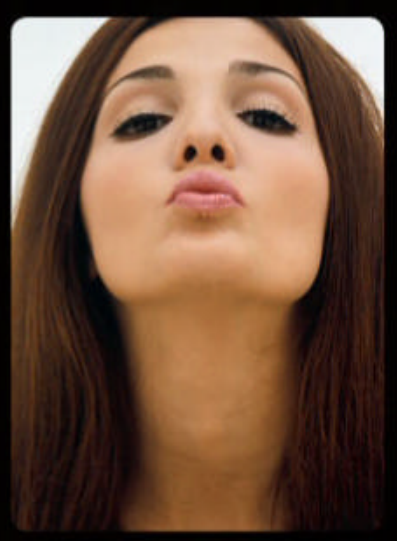
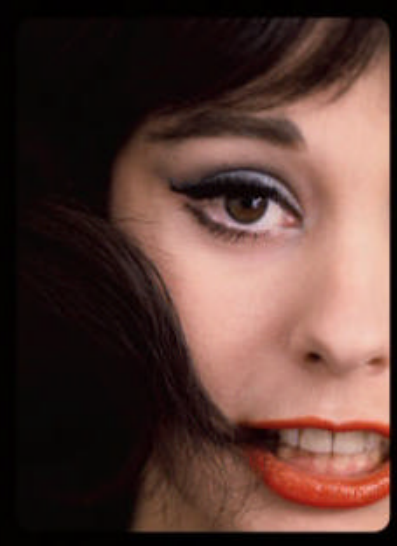


MIAMI BEACH, 1970

Bunny Kathie makes waves outside the Miami Playboy Club.